



Another Place in Time



A COLLECTION OF HISTORICAL SHORT STORIES

Tamara Allen Joanna Chambers KJ Charles
Kaje Harper Jordan L Hawk Aleksandr Voinov
Foreword by Alex Beecroft

Another Place in Time



A COLLECTION OF HISTORICAL SHORT STORIES

**Tamara Allen Joanna Chambers KJ Charles
Kaje Harper Jordan L Hawk Aleksandr Voinov
Foreword by Alex Beecroft**

Another Place in Time

Copyright © 2014 Boys in our Books

ISBN: 978-0-692288-73-3

Smashwords Edition

All rights reserved.

This anthology is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Art

Copyright © Susan Lee

syleegurldesigns.tumblr.com

Images copyright © Shutterstock

Edited by Dana Trejo

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

by Alex Beecroft

OFFICE ROMANCE

by Tamara Allen

INTRODUCING MR. WINTERBOURNE

by Joanna Chambers

THE RUIN OF GABRIEL ASHLEIGH

by KJ Charles

UNFAIR IN LOVE AND WAR

by Kaje Harper

CAROUSEL

by Jordan L Hawk

DELIVERANCE

by Aleksandr Voinov

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection of short stories was birthed because a sworn “I don’t like historicals” reader fell in love with what have become some of her favorite books by most of her favorite writers. Surprisingly, they were all historicals. Determined to make others feel the love, these authors were asked to contribute small tastes of how amazing historical storytelling can be.

Thank you to all the authors who generously and enthusiastically gave their time and talents to this project: Tamara Allen, Alex Beecroft, Joanna Chambers, KJ Charles, Kaje Harper, Jordan L. Hawk, and Aleksandr Voinov. It was such a pleasure.

Thanks to the Boys In Our Books team for supporting this endeavor.

This was a labor of love and I am thrilled to have been a part of it.

Best,
Susan

All proceeds from the purchase of this anthology will be donated to AllOut.org in celebration of LGBT History Month, October 2014.

FOREWORD

by Alex Beecroft

I don't get on well with my family, and to be honest my family don't get on well with each other. By the time I was old enough to recognise the people around me, there was only me, mum and dad and occasional visits by my much older sisters. My grandparents were dead. Cousins, uncles, aunts etc, I believed I didn't have any. Beyond the nuclear family, relatives were not spoken of. I knew we had moved to the part of England where I was growing up from Northern Ireland, because I remembered that trip, and I knew that my parents had moved to Ireland from somewhere else before that, but I didn't know where they had come from originally.

As far as I was concerned, we had no past and we had no extended family. There was no sense in which we were part of anything larger. Just the three of us in a small house and blank white space where the rest of the world might have been.

Maybe that was one of the reasons why I've always gravitated to history.

Where I live now, it's so flat that on a good day I can see the tower and the lantern of Ely cathedral across miles of farmland under the huge, cloud haunted sky of the fens. The present cathedral was built in 1109ad on the site of an earlier monastery, founded by St. Aetheldreda in 673ad. Ely is my local market town so I go into the cathedral often to pray or think in peace, and as I sit there in this spot where people of my county have been doing the same thing for going on 1400 years, I feel the sense of community, of belonging, that my family never had.

In a way, knowing the history of your country/your people is knowing who you are — what debts and what privileges your ancestors have bequeathed to you. I morris dance a lot, and that's a similar thing — I'm aware that I'm taking part in something that's been a tradition in my country since the 15th century, and whose roots go back into a shared Indo-European past that we can only dimly guess about. Follow the morris back far enough and you find that it connects up with dances from Spain, Morocco, from Romania, Germany and Portugal, even from India.

History is forever teaching us that we are all linked. That I, who walk the

maze set in the floor of Ely cathedral, am part of a continuity of people who have walked it before me. I am part of the curve in the waterfall that existed before I did and will endure long after my particular little droplet has passed.

I think this is why Queer historical fiction is so important. A lot of us have had problems with our families and have not felt a sense of belonging there. Historians are now beginning to look beneath the straight-washing of the Victorians, who bowdlerised original sources to fit them to their straight-laced view of the world and buried what they couldn't reinterpret. It's beginning to be perfectly clear that queer people of all sorts have always been here. We too have been walking the mazes and dancing the dances of our culture throughout all recorded history and beyond.

But so much of the evidence has been lost or covered up. Queer people have been left thinking that history does not belong to them — that outside this modern moment was nothing but a blank white space, or worse, nothing but unrelenting condemnation.

It's not good to be left feeling disconnected, as if you have no family and no place in the world, as if you don't belong.

I have to applaud the efforts of some historians to uncover the evidence that puts gay and lesbian people, bisexuals, transgender people, pansexuals, asexuals, genderqueer people and others of the GSRM community back into the stream out of which we dip our present day society. Their efforts are vital, but they don't reach people like stories do.

To my mind, that's a primary reason why queer historical fiction is so important. A story can seize the imagination and the heart in the way a textbook can't. If you read the stories and you think, "Yes, by God, we have been in this world *forever*. We belong here," then you've put down a root that maybe you didn't have before. And roots are essential if a plant is going to thrive.



OFFICE ROMANCE

by
Tamara Allen

My first inkling I was in trouble came the November day Mr. Leach made a rare appearance in accounting, bringing with him a gentleman introduced to us as efficiency expert Hubert Templeton. If he was unimposing in height and weight, Mr. Templeton made up for it with a fearsome gaze behind a beribboned pince-nez. As he marched the broad length of our department, pausing at each desk to pass silent judgment, I heard from behind me the swift shuffling of papers and whisper of drawers hastily opened or shut. Typewriter keys fell silent along with the chatter common in the closing hours, when everyone was resisting the influence of a chilly workroom and the last lazy efforts of the afternoon sun.

Mr. Leach remained at the front, near my desk, looking out over us like a kindly grandfather—if one accustomed to only the best behaved of grandchildren. “As of today, ladies and gentlemen, we’re introducing a new model of efficiency that will take us successfully into the new decade. The principles of scientific management have served a number of companies, and I’m confident they’ll prove as beneficial here at Manhattan Security Mutual. I anticipate cutting waste in all departments, beginning with correspondence. However . . .” He bowed in courtly homage to the row of secretaries at the southwest windows. “I’ve no doubt we’ll find our lovely sunflowers already at their most proficient.”

The ladies laughed politely, and Mr. Leach’s wizened features pulled into a lopsided smirk. Beside me, Bill Wallace groaned, a reaction I barely kept myself from echoing as the boss swung his gaze back to us. “Onward to accounting. Gentlemen.” A wry note stood out. “Well, I suppose it will suffice to say I’ve hired Mr. Templeton to get us on the right road. Any questions you may have, you will direct to him.”

“New methods,” Bill muttered. “New efficiency. New decade. Why do I get the feeling any day now we’re going to be looking for new jobs?”

We were all wise to the ongoing discussions upstairs, if we didn’t know the details. Other departments had let people go. I’d hoped we would last through the year’s end to find ’21 bringing better tidings. I’d hoped that as the newest employee in the accounting department, I wouldn’t be the first handed my walking papers.

“Foster Wetherly.” Mr. Leach settled a smile tinged with somber sympathy on me. “I’d like to talk to you upstairs. And Casey Gladwin—where . . .?”

Most likely on the other side of the room, flirting with the secretaries. It was a sore temptation to say it aloud. Somehow I restrained myself. “Mr. Gladwin’s desk is at the back, two rows over.”

Mr. Leach seemed surprised by the precise reply, but I would have wagered that everyone on the fourth floor knew where Casey Gladwin sat on those rare occasions he could be found at his desk rather than hovering over someone else's, going on about everything under the sun. It was a wonder he finished any work. Less of a wonder was the possibility Mr. Leach might let him go.

At the moment, I could take little pleasure in Casey Gladwin's anticipated absence when my own seemed imminent. With no prospects and too many doctor's bills to pay, I didn't have a hope of moving back into my own apartment. My parents might not mind their only son stuck yet in the nest, but I didn't know if I could bear another year in the room that belonged not to me, but to the boy whose biggest worry four years ago was what to do with himself once he finished college.

As I stepped into the elevator, I tried to concentrate on an argument that would persuade Mr. Leach to keep me at least through winter. If things improved and I found another job by spring . . .

I'd only begun to close the elevator door when a battered ash cane swung through the cab gate. Opening the gate, Gladwin stepped in and gave me a commiserating smile. "You, too? I have to say I'm surprised. You're more devoted to that grindstone than anyone else on the fourth floor."

"I was the most recently hired." The same day as he, though I doubted he'd remember it.

"Yes." Gladwin studied me with a more somber air. "Three months ago, right? It's a funny thing. When the manager plucked us out of the line of applicants, I thought we were bound to hit it off. I get these ideas about fate—" He suddenly grinned. "Which shows you how silly they are. I suppose there's a laugh to be had over being both hired and fired on the same days."

"I hope you'll understand when I say I can't really afford to laugh."

There was a trace of apology in his gaze, but it didn't dampen the sheen of good humor. "When can a man not afford to laugh?"

The elevator door released me from captivity, and I stepped out ahead of Gladwin, outpacing him down the long corridor to the executive offices. There, I glanced back to see him leaning more heavily on the cane than he ordinarily did downstairs, with no ladies around to impress.

Before he could catch up, I went in, hoping to have a moment alone with the boss; but it was in vain, as we were made to wait ten minutes in the anteroom while Mr. Leach finished his chat with the fourth-floor manager. Though the manager might have said any number of good things about my work, once I'd taken a seat before Mr. Leach's old oak desk, where my record was spread alongside Gladwin's, it seemed clear that no argument in

the world would spare either of us. The restraint in Mr. Leach's manner, the way he shut the files and set them aside, the regretful curl of his lips—none of it invited discussion.

Gladwin knew it, I sensed. But he wouldn't keep quiet. "No chance of reprieve?"

The rueful note made Mr. Leach chuckle. "Don't alarm yourself just yet, sir. While I do have to let one of you go—"

"One?" Gladwin shifted in his chair. "Something tells me we're not flipping a coin."

The remark, directed to me, I steadfastly ignored. "Mr. Leach, if you've called us up to make a case for ourselves—"

"Not right this minute." The smile he sent my way was very nearly reassuring. "You'll make a case for yourselves over the next two weeks. Mr. Templeton believes this is an expedient method of retaining those who are most suited to fulfill our organization's goals. I imagine you feel singled out, but we're testing this in more than one department. If it doesn't sit well with either of you to be so judged, you may request a character reference right now, and I'll be pleased to provide it."

Any affection I possessed for scientific principles was rapidly dwindling away. "My work will speak for itself, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Wetherly. Mr. Gladwin?"

Gladwin seemed to need a moment to find his voice. "I'll do whatever's necessary, sir."

"Excellent. Mr. Templeton will be overseeing your work. To facilitate this, Mr. Gladwin, I'd like you to exchange desks with Mr. Wallace for the time being."

As much as I loathed the idea of Gladwin's desk next to mine, it could only benefit me. Mr. Templeton would get an eyeful of Gladwin's work habits, and maybe that would be enough to sway the balance.

It was a hope of which I had to remind myself the next day when Gladwin gathered his belongings and dumped them across Bill's desk. Bill had already removed himself to Gladwin's desk, at Mr. Templeton's behest. Said Templeton buzzed up and down the aisles, an unsettling presence that kept every head bent over typewriter and adding machine.

Even so, suppressed amusement rose from the row behind me as Gladwin put a bulky comptometer down on one corner of his new desk, encroaching deliberately on my desk in the process. As he dropped into his chair, he appeared to notice my annoyance. "Your machine's the one parked on the wrong side."

"It's right where it suits me." I picked up my pen, determined that Mr. Templeton's charge back up the aisle should find me hard at work.

Gladwin's soft snort pulled my attention back, and I frowned at him. "If you find it inconvenient—"

"Not at all." A bright-eyed gaze slid my way. "I didn't know you were left-handed. Reminds me of the fellow at my last job who was fired for it."

"Oh, come now. They fired him for being left-handed?"

Gladwin lifted his shoulders in a rueful shrug. "It slowed him down. Put him at odds with the office equipment." He shot a pointed glance at the ruler I'd reversed with painted-on numbers. "Everyone wants to be efficient these days."

His laugh was quiet, but the sardonic note rang clear, as if he loathed the situation as much as I did. Or he wanted me to believe that. If I didn't keep up my guard, I'd find myself manipulated out of a job. "I'm not at odds," I assured him and moved my own calculating machine to the right hand corner of my desk.

"Not with the equipment, anyway." He flashed me an altogether impish grin before swiftly returning to the task at hand. Mr. Templeton was on the prowl, rounding our double row of desks with no doubt every suspicion that work wasn't being done. The pile of Gladwin's personal possessions inspired a clucking disapproval.

"Casey Gladwin?" Mr. Templeton leaned toward him, peering hard through the pince-nez.

Gladwin, frowning, leaned back. "Yes, sir. I've just landed. Give me a minute to sort everything."

"Minutes wasted add up quickly, Mr. Gladwin. Do you know how a business survives a period of economic instability?"

"The same way we survived the war. A little prayer and a lot of luck."

I choked back a laugh. Gladwin's breezy charm and dark-haired, blue-eyed good looks had made him a lot of friends in the last three months, but it wouldn't get him anywhere now. I knew as much when Mr. Templeton drew back, shoulders squared. "Do you take your job seriously, Mr. Gladwin?"

"I do, sir."

"Then you may wish to provide even the smallest evidence of your desire to keep it." Mr. Templeton turned to me, and I swiftly dropped the pen—and as hastily scooped it up in my right hand. He seemed not to notice. "Frederick Wetherly?"

"Foster, sir."

"Beg pardon." Mr. Templeton looked over my desk. "You seem very organized, Mr. Wetherly. However . . ." He picked up the orange I'd left under the shade of my lamp. "Do you ordinarily dine at your desk?"

"No, sir. But my doctor prescribed—" That revelation seemed a bad idea. "I keep something at my desk in case I'm hungry late in the day. For

efficiency's sake," I added, hoping it would induce him to leave it at that.

"I see. In future, leave nothing on your desk that doesn't contribute to the task at hand." Mr. Templeton put down the orange. "I won't keep you further, but trust I'm staying apprised of your habits as Mr. Leach requested." His gaze, as he spoke, lingered on Gladwin. When he'd turned his attention to the next row, I let out a relieved breath. It would be a task indeed, to get through such examinations and hold my thoughts together to focus on work at the same time. I opened a drawer and tucked the orange inside—only to notice Gladwin was observing with interest. Anything to avoid work, I supposed, and picked up my pen all the more determinedly.

"Your doctor prescribes fruit?"

"To strengthen my lungs." And make the rest of the pills a little more palatable.

"Were you gassed?" It was asked quietly, all trace of humor gone.

The question surprised me—as did his interest. "I had the flu. Nearly died of it."

"Nearly's close enough. You look all right now."

"I'm quite all right."

"Why all the pills?" he asked, with a nod toward the drawer. He'd gotten a good look, evidently.

"My doctor means to keep me well."

"Keep you well or keep him in pocket?"

I turned from my work just far enough to meet his inquisitive gaze. "Mr. Gladwin, you do recall why we're here?"

"To be educated in scientific principles, I understand." Gladwin opened his desk drawer to drop in a handful of paperbacks. That was followed by a box of pencils, a hand mirror and comb, an ancient pocketknife, a well-worn bandelore, and a handsome blue glass shooter marble.

I couldn't help asking. "No ninepins?"

He laughed. "Priorities, Mr. Wetherly." Reaching behind his chair, he grabbed hold of a box stuffed with paper and hauled it onto the desk. He soon had it in tidy piles that seemed to impress even Mr. Templeton on his next circuit around the room. My work progressed more slowly, but I couldn't bring myself to switch the pen back to my left hand, not with Mr. Templeton's relentless hovering.

By late afternoon, my legibility had improved, but my speed had not. Gladwin had cleared his desk of all papers, but had yet to leave. I wasn't the only one reluctant to call it a day. When Mr. Templeton finally gathered up the voluminous notebook in which he'd been apparently recording his impressions and bid the two of us good-night, I caught Gladwin's sigh and could have echoed it.

It promised to be an interminable couple of weeks, but I wasn't giving up. The outward trappings of my job weren't much to speak of. The building itself was a creaking, drafty pile of bones on a street shadowed by too many taller piles. The wind seemed an eternal presence, finding its way through masonry, plaster, and paint to seep through the stitching of my warmest sweaters and chill me in body and spirit both. But over three months, I'd settled in, become accustomed to the routine, the familiar faces, the sheer comfort in small kindnesses. Bill Wallace and the other fellows had seen me through my first few weeks. The ladies were, to a one, always ready to cheer a fellow, and Mrs. Bradshaw at the first-floor reception desk had more than once brought me a batch of the molasses cookies that had strengthened her son after his bout with the flu.

Even with Gladwin's capricious presence, the office had been a homey place. I didn't want to start over somewhere else. In a mood to grouse, I arrived home to a quiet parlor and remembered it was Tuesday night. Bridge night. I should have been glad to have the house to myself, but up in my room, the shadows were unwelcoming, and the silence encouraged too many glum thoughts.

The heaviest shadow lay over the bed in the corner, leaving it tomb-like. I had tossed and turned too much in that bed recently. Perhaps it was no longer a sickbed, but it remained a lonely spot. As miserable as I'd been in France, I hadn't been alone. Troubles had been shared, comforts offered. Without much of a future to consider, I'd found it easier to seek out those comforts. But it was a courage I hadn't mustered since coming home. I had a future again—and that had added an impossible weight to the present.

Really, I was still getting over my time in France. And I was still a little too thin from my bout with the flu. Once I was stronger, I'd go back to old haunts, meet up with other fellows finding their feet, maybe run into someone who had a flat of his own and liked the quiet type.

Until then, the future was wrapped in its own shadows. I drew back the blankets on the bed, but couldn't bring myself to lie down. The armchair, tucked in the only patch of moonlight, looked far more appealing.

I woke there at too early an hour and decided it was a stroke of luck. I'd be at the office before Gladwin and maybe even before Mr. Templeton.

I did beat Mr. Templeton.

"Two early birds," Gladwin said cheerfully, moving what appeared to be his breakfast from the top of my desk.

"And only one worm." Sitting, I glanced around at the unoccupied desks and felt strangely like a schoolboy who'd arrived way too early—or too late.

"A shame we can't just cut it in half."

“I couldn’t get by on half my pay. Could you?”

Gladwin seemed to seriously consider it. “A two-bit hall bedroom a *little* off Fifth Avenue. Coffee and sandwiches at the automat . . .” His gaze dropped to the orange I’d laid temporarily on the desk, and he grinned. “The occasional forbidden fruit. What else does a fellow need?”

“You’ll have nothing put by. What if you fall ill?” I opened my desk drawer in search of the vitamin pills Dr. Stanley had given me. I wasn’t entirely sure what ailment they addressed, but he’d said they would keep me fit, along with the camphor, the blood purifier, the nervine for sleeplessness, the bitters to ward off post-flu rheumatism—and the pills for dyspepsia, which came in handy once all the other medicines went down.

As I shook out a vitamin, Gladwin leaned over and peered into the drawer. “Six bottles?” He raised a quizzical gaze to mine, and I shut the drawer soundly.

“If you’re thinking you might share news of the sad state of my health with Mr. Templeton, let me assure you I’m entirely well and getting stronger with each day. Mr. Leach has nothing to worry about.”

Blue eyes only sparkled at me with amusement. “Quite an assumption in regard to my motives. We don’t even know each other.”

“No, we don’t.” My fault, perhaps, as much as his. But it was too late to do anything about it. Even if we’d wanted to. “Priorities, Mr. Gladwin.”

He was quiet, and what his face may have given away, I refused to note. Perhaps he’d meant a genuine overture of friendship, but I’d seen him charm others into doing things for him, and I wasn’t about to let down my guard and hand over my job. When Mr. Templeton appeared at eight sharp, I’d set myself a furious pace, one I planned to maintain after lunch—one I would have maintained were it not for a suddenly recalcitrant comptometer. The keys stuck, the lever resisting my efforts, but I was reluctant to leave my desk and track down another machine. God knew what Gladwin might say about me in my absence.

As the afternoon wore on, I fell further behind and resigned myself to staying late again. Gladwin had cleared his desk, which did not go unnoticed as Mr. Templeton came by with notebook in hand. “Impressive, sir. You’ve quite exceeded my expectations.”

Before he could comment on the files still cluttering my desk, I hastened to explain. “The machine. It’s in need of repair. The keys are sticking terribly—”

“Why didn’t you mention it earlier?” Mr. Templeton asked.

“Well, it was working just fine this morning . . .” *And it was.* Then I’d gone downstairs for lunch. I narrowed a glance at Gladwin, who eyed me back beatifically.

“You have my sympathy, Mr. Wetherly. My machine kept sticking, too. Unpredictable things, aren’t they?”

“Not as unpredictable as one may think.” If Gladwin wanted to play that game, it was just fine by me. “Mr. Templeton, I was remiss in not bringing the comptometer to your attention, but I certainly don’t intend to use it as an excuse to leave my work undone. I’ll stay.”

Mr. Templeton’s face cleared. “Good man. I’m sure Mr. Gladwin will be happy to lend you his comptometer for the remainder of the evening.”

Gladwin gestured expansively. “Be my guest.”

My sheer annoyance with the man raised my flagging energy, but by the time I’d finished, I was angrier with myself. Mr. Templeton’s constant presence and Gladwin’s competence had together contrived to frighten me. Any other day, I would’ve traded out machines and gone on without a thought. Now I was trudging home past eight, heavy-hearted. I didn’t really like the idea of playing dirty, and I was surprised Gladwin had crossed that line. He probably didn’t have a penny laid aside, just as I’d thought. Desperation would lead him to similar tricks, and I had to be alert for them.

Despite a poor night’s sleep, I was up at six and at my desk by seven-thirty. Gladwin had not arrived, but a rather grim-faced Templeton stood at the front of the room and called upon the attention of those present. “Ladies and gentlemen, a number of businesses provide only a half hour for lunch. Mr. Leach is particularly generous in allowing forty-five minutes. A number of you, however, wander back rather nearer the hour. If this continues, I will advise instituting a half-hour lunch. Really, it’s more than sufficient.”

There was nary a groan behind me. I wasn’t the only one now thoroughly intimidated by Mr. Templeton, it seemed. It wasn’t until he left the room that outraged chatter broke out. But lunch was the least of my worries. With my own comptometer at my disposal, I set to work like a fiend—hardly noticing when Gladwin showed up and plunged to work as purposefully.

“I missed something,” he said after a few minutes. He appeared to have caught the ongoing talk.

“Mr. Templeton announced a change in the time we’re allowed for lunch.”

“Giving us a full hour?”

At his wry amusement, I smiled, myself. “Like the idea, do you? You’re in luck, then.” I left it at that, not expecting he would, too. But he seemed preoccupied and remained steadfastly at his desk until the noon hour arrived. I held my tongue, certain that someone at lunch would let spill about Mr. Templeton’s warning, and Gladwin would realize I was willing to resort to tricks, too. But he didn’t put in his usual appearance at the restaurant

down the street, nor did he reappear at his desk until just before one. I paid him no real mind until he spoke. "I ran into Mr. Templeton on the elevator."

I resisted an unwelcome prickle of guilt. "Did you?"

Gladwin let out a soft laugh. "I don't know why I expected better of you."

"Of me? What about you? I was here till eight last night, and I don't believe it did anything to salvage Mr. Templeton's opinion of my work pace. And I'd guess he knows about the medicines in my desk drawer—"

"As long as you do your work, I don't think he cares what your pill peddler stuffs down your throat. Pills you don't need, if you ask me. You look pretty damned healthy."

"You—" I lowered my voice with an effort as everyone in the row behind us glanced in our direction. "I could make the same presumptions about your selective use of that cane, Mr. Gladwin. One couldn't guess whether you're as crippled as you make yourself out to be—" He didn't cut me off, not with words. The stricken look on his face was enough.

"I'm not . . ." His jaw tightened, and he turned away. Mr. Templeton rounded the aisle at that instant and stopped in front of us like a disapproving schoolmaster.

"Is there some difficulty, gentlemen?"

Gladwin gave me not the slightest glance. "A minor disagreement over work. One we've resolved."

"Yes?" Mr. Templeton looked suspiciously at me. "Mr. Wetherly, I must ask you directly. Are you ill?"

Startled, I looked at him—then, unable to help myself, at Gladwin. But he looked as startled. I struggled to find my voice. "I had the flu last spring." And at times I found myself half expecting to fall deathly ill all over again. "But I'm the picture of health, sir. Mr. Gladwin was only just commenting on it a moment ago."

A soft snort escaped Gladwin, and Mr. Templeton looked at him askance. "Well, that may be, but I want an explanation for this." He laid a ledger in front of me. "Your work, Mr. Wetherly, from yesterday. I've seen it before. The changes in your handwriting indicate a man who's ill. Or taken to drink."

Shocked, I hastily shook my head. "I was writing with my right hand, sir. Nothing more."

Puzzlement gleamed behind the pince-nez. "Are you right-handed, Mr. Wetherly?"

Gladwin's head tilted, one blue eye peeking at me over his shoulder. I wasn't sure whether he'd let me escape with a lie, but I couldn't chance it. "No, sir. I just thought I'd better—"

"You'd better write with the hand you're accustomed to using. We want legible work, Mr. Wetherly. This will not suit."

"Yes, sir. I'll switch hands."

"Thank you." Mr. Templeton started away, then hesitated. "Mr. Gladwin, I've changed my mind about this evening. You needn't stay late to make up the half hour." His tone was unusually gentle. "Give your mother my regards. I hope she's feeling better."

When he'd gone, I looked at Gladwin in disbelief. "Using your mother as an excuse? Really?"

Gladwin merely smiled faintly and proceeded, sans cane but with a noticeable limp, across to the file cabinets. I had the terrible thought that his mother might be genuinely ill—and I was an ass for suggesting otherwise. But he made it impossible to know when he was being honest and when he was pulling some sly trick. Even now, he'd stopped at Louise Nowell's desk to flirt with her. If he was worried about his mother, his job, or anything else, he hid it well.

But no matter the truth or untruth of it, he'd gained Mr. Templeton's sympathies—and I'd only succeeded in provoking the man. As the days crawled past, I could feel the job slipping through my fingers and Gladwin seizing firmer hold of it. I spent Thanksgiving morning perusing the want ads, something that did not pass unnoticed by my own mother, who cornered me in the kitchen and set me to work shelling peas.

"You're going to be let go?"

As direct as only she could be. I had to laugh. "There's a chance of it." An excellent chance, but I couldn't say so.

I saw in her face she wanted to hug me. Fingers deep in pie dough, she simply nodded. "A dreadful business for you boys to come back to . . ." Her voice went thick and she frowned as if irritated with herself. "You won't say a word about this to him, but your father's in the same trouble."

"They're letting him go?" After thirty-five years. I couldn't believe it. "When?"

"It's not a certainty." She lifted a flour-streaked face to smile ruefully at me. "Though it may as well be, for all the fretting he's doing. You're alike in that. But never mind. We have our savings. We'll get by better than some."

"I'm sorry." If I'd worked harder . . .

"None of that, Foster." Her soft brown eyes were all at once sharp and bright. "After what we've been through the past two years, this won't hurt us. You're still here." Her lips tightened, and she went at the defenseless dough with furious energy. "This won't hurt at all."

I resolved to make sure it didn't.

I was at my desk by seven on a dreary Monday, full of toast and coffee

and tearing through paperwork at a speed that threatened to put my old, reliable comptometer on the blink. Gladwin had apparently come by a better machine, for he was keeping up easily, even on the complex Burton file. His face was set as he worked, his attention hard on the page before him. He hadn't said more than good morning to me since I'd come in. I was ready to apologize—until I spotted him carrying on cheerfully with Miss Nowell. He might find an apology from me merely amusing at this point, another little triumph before the final one to come. I was in no frame of mind to make his victory any sweeter.

But I hadn't surrendered. At noon, I stayed at my desk, dining on a rather dry turkey sandwich and a piece of pie crumbling apart in hastily folded wax paper. A cup of coffee from the recreation room made it more palatable, but the lonely atmosphere of an empty office left a lump in my throat, all the same. It didn't seem real that I'd be looking for work again—and if I didn't find it quickly, I'd have to pull up stakes altogether and try another town. I wouldn't be a burden if my parents had to live on their savings. I'd trek all the way to California first.

Once I was gone, Gladwin would go on working and flirting and charming people into giving him his way—at least until the day he misplaced the financial documents of one of our most important clients.

I stared at the Burton file for a long minute, flirting, myself, with the consequences of going that far to keep my job. Gladwin might have taken similar advantage of the situation. He'd initiated the battle between us. But this—it could be the finish of him. And, come the first of December, I'd still be employed.

I couldn't do it. I tried to get back to work, focusing on the numbers in front of me, but I lost track, my attention straying to the clock above the long row of file cabinets. So many cabinets. Files were often misplaced, and the clerks wasted time searching for them. Sometimes files set hastily atop the cabinets fell back behind them and weren't found for days. Such carelessness had gotten one clerk fired.

It was nearly twelve-thirty. Scooping up the file, I moved to the last cabinet and opened the bottom drawer. I'd barely tucked the file inside before the elevator opened and I heard voices in the hall. My gut twisted, and I pulled a deep breath into shrinking lungs. I took my seat, but my concentration was only more fragile, my hands shaking too much to strike keys with any accuracy. I didn't want the job this way. I didn't want *anything* this way.

Gladwin came in with Louise at his side, and I wondered distractedly if they'd dined together. She slowed by my desk. "No lunch? Dear old Fuss. You can't work on an empty stomach, you know."

I managed a good-natured smile at the rather unflattering endearment, knowing she meant it affectionately. "I've already eaten. Minutes wasted, and all that."

"Dear old Fuss," Gladwin said with a soft laugh. Something in his voice sent a shiver—part uneasiness, part pleasure—through me. As disconcerting as it was, I wanted to hear him say it again. But he only dropped into his chair and flashed Louise a grin. "Thanks for the ear. I do feel better."

She leaned across the desk and patted his shoulder. "Everything will be all right. You'll see."

I waited until she was gone before sneaking a sidelong glance at Gladwin. He'd picked up a pencil but sat, tapping it idly, his gaze far away. He hadn't missed the file yet. I could retrieve it and leave it where it would be found. "You and Louise," I ventured. "You're not . . ."

He roused himself with obvious effort. "Louise?" He looked at me and put on a smile he didn't seem to feel. "We're just pals."

"You're not as cheered as you hoped to be." The comment slipped out almost against my will. It didn't seem a conversation I should be having, under the circumstances.

Gladwin's smile took on a more genuine tilt. "Some things just call for getting used to."

"Yes, of course. I know what you mean." I wasn't any good at reassurances, but I couldn't seem to shut up. "It takes me too long to get used to things changing. It always has. And I can make such a grand mess of everything in the meantime."

Gladwin reached across the desk for a file and flipped it open listlessly. "Thank God for distractions, right?" His gaze dropped, and his voice. "If I can just be distracted."

He didn't realize just how distracted he really was—and I stayed quiet, thinking the workday's end would give me the opportunity to slip the file back on his desk before he or anyone else discovered it missing. At six-thirty, I had it in my hands when suddenly the office's quiet was broken by the elevator door. Voices froze me to the spot. Mr. Leach. And Gladwin.

"It's on my desk, sir. But I haven't . . ." Gladwin trailed off as he and Mr. Leach came into the room.

"The Burton file?" I held it out to him, but Mr. Leach took it and began a hurried perusal of it. "I thought I'd put the file away for you."

"Did you?" Less question than realization, judging by Gladwin's narrowed gaze. "Decent of you."

I tried to convey a silent apology, but he only watched me warily as Mr. Leach shut the file with a snap. "I'll need this completed by tomorrow and on my desk before noon." He turned it over to Gladwin. "Templeton tells me

you're both handling the situation well. Keep it up. Good night, gentlemen."

"Good night, sir." Gladwin's gaze never left me. He said nothing until the elevator door closed. Then he only tilted his head, a curious smile on his lips. "Really?"

"I realized—I mean, I did, yes, but I was just putting it back on your desk when you walked in—"

His laugh cut me off. "Come on. I know I can be as gullible as they come, but that's a lot to swallow."

That I'd changed my mind didn't absolve me, but it bothered me that he wouldn't believe the truth. I caught up with him at the elevator just as he was drawing shut the gate. "Mr. Gladwin, if you'd allow me a minute to explain."

A corner of his mouth twisted wryly. "I've got an appointment to keep. And a long evening of work ahead. I'd like to get to it."

"I'm—" The door shut, and I was left standing with the half-finished apology on my lips. *Damn it.* Why the hell did I care? In the past three months, he'd rarely said more than good morning to me.

And I'd never encouraged him to say more. Even when I'd wanted to.

The rattle of the elevator faded, and in the silence, I fancied I could hear my heart beating. It had been pounding through me a few minutes ago. Now it was slowing down like a windup toy, and I half expected it to slip unresistingly into stillness. My life since the war had been without any kind of direction. My job had been the only solid thing under me, a safe corner from which I watched the world struggle to right itself. But merely watching was a lonely business.

If Casey Gladwin wandered, chatted, and flirted, what was wrong with that? He got his work done. I might've wandered, chatted, and flirted, but I'd forgotten how to do those things. Or maybe France had used up my small store of bravery. God knew there was no courage in trying to keep a job by false means.

I wanted to go home, but I was in no mood to face my parents. I needed to be alone, but not at the office with its shadows and vast quiet. Getting my coat, I shut off my desk lamp and started back for the elevator, only to step on something that crumpled underfoot. A tax sheet, I realized, from the Burton file.

I tried to catch Gladwin before he left the building, but there was no sign of him in the lobby or on the street. I realized I didn't have the first idea where he lived. Back upstairs, I looked through his desk, doubting I'd find anything like an address or telephone number. The day book I came across listed a number of people in the office, and I was debating whether to call Louise Nowell and ask if she knew Gladwin's address when I inadvertently

flipped to the back of the book and found it there.

At least, it appeared to be his address. It was a rather rough neighborhood—one I was hesitant to visit after dark. But I wanted the chance to talk to him. If he was not in a forgiving frame of mind, he might at least know the regret I felt.

Choosing a cab over the subway, I was shortly deposited on the sidewalk in front of an East Side apartment that looked as though it had been standing a hundred years. Despite the fall of night, the street was alive with children racing up and down the pavement, their parents framed in windows or leaning over stoops to talk with neighbors. All down the street, vendors crowded, bulky in coats and aprons, caps pulled low against the crisp night air. The air Dr. Stanley had warned me to avoid until I was entirely well.

Devil take it, I *was* well. I ran up the steps and slipped into an alcove with cracked tiles and a radiator serving as a coatrack for the boys playing stickball in the road. On the second floor, I located Gladwin's abode, but two firm knocks drew no one and my heart sank. All I could do was try to slip the tax sheet under the door.

"You looking for Casey?"

Startled, I hastily straightened and took in a tall, stout personage with curly black hair and a grin that made his round face all the rounder. In his shirtsleeves, his dark pants paint-splattered, he leaned against a ladder propped at the hall's end, smoking a cigar as if he had nothing more important to do. I nodded guardedly. "Do you know Mr. Gladwin?"

"He's quiet and tries to keep up with his rent. Don't need to know much more."

I sensed he did know rather more. "Do you know where he's gone?"

"To get a bite of supper, I'd expect." Pushing away from the ladder, he came to the door. "James McGinley. You a friend of Casey's?"

"Well, not precisely."

"Keeping company?"

"I beg your pardon?"

McGinley chuckled. "Guess I'm mistaken. What's your business, then?"

"I work with Mr. Gladwin. He left something behind at the office, and I've brought it for him. I suppose he only just left?"

"Five minutes past. And he's likely to be a while. He said he wasn't visiting her again so soon, but if you ask me, he'll be going up till he knows she's settled in."

"His mother?"

A guess, and an accurate one, judging by the sympathetic tilt of Mr. McGinley's curly head. "Only met her the once. Sweet old dove. Pity she

ain't right."

"She's ill?"

"Bad ill," McGinley said, with a tap of a finger against his brow. "Wandered off a time or two. But he found a place uptown, neat as you please. She'll be all right there."

Understanding crept in. "Private homes are rather pricey."

"Damned if they ain't. That reminds me." McGinley slipped a key into the lock and opened the door. "Would you just mention to him he's still owing that last bit for November? He handed over a fair penny up front to get her in, I know, so I ain't pressing. He can pay it with December's rent, if he wants. But mention it if you would, seeing as you know him well enough."

I didn't, but there seemed no point in saying so. Going inside, I found the front room furnished with only a desk at the window and an armchair at the hearth. Good quality pieces, they were, and I suspected the remainder of the furniture had been sold. The Burton file lay on the desk—and beside it, of all things, an orange.

Perhaps I hadn't been an altogether bad deskmate. Still, I had something to make up for. I'd intended to leave the tax sheet and go, but that wasn't enough. Settling myself at the desk, I unearthed scrap paper and a pencil and opened the file.

When I raised my head again, it was to find the hour well past ten. The little room was foreign in the darkness beyond the desk lamp—and chilly, besides. I rose and lit a fire in the hearth, realizing only after that Gladwin might be away for the night. Debating whether to douse the fire and leave, I heard footsteps nearing the door and opened it. It was only a red-haired fellow dressed incongruously in a heavy overcoat and a straw hat. He looked a little unsteady. And then I noted the bottle in each hand.

Seeing me in the doorway, he broke into a wide grin. "Well, how d'you do? Casey told me he'd be alone, so I thought I'd bring a little good cheer by . . ." He stopped in front of me and squinted inquiringly. "Didn't occur to me he'd find his own good cheer. Mind if I have a word?" He peered past my shoulder, into the room.

"Casey isn't here, and I'm not sure when he's due back."

"Oh, damn." The gentleman leaned in close, studying my face rather too intently. "What about you, then? Care for a bit of cheer?" He raised a bottle, then expanded on the definition with a damp kiss on my cheek.

"Jesus, Sam." It was Gladwin, at the top of the stairs. "Leave him alone." He came quickly to the door and got Sam by the collar. "Go on home, will you? I've got a pile of work tonight." His glance, tired and guarded, took me in as he spoke.

Sam, even in his cups, seemed to realize something out of the ordinary was going on. He clasped Gladwin's shoulder briefly—apologetically, I thought—and took off, leaving me to explain my apparently even less welcome presence. But Gladwin didn't give me the chance.

"Congratulations." A defeated note made itself heard beneath the surface sarcasm. "You've got what you need to get me fired."

He thought I'd do just that. Of course he didn't know any better. I grabbed hold of his lapels, pulled him against my chest, and kissed him. It was as rough as every ugly word I'd said to him in the past couple of weeks and as defiant. His lips were lax with shock, and he jerked back, staring at me. I forced out a laugh. "So do you." More than anger had set my heart pounding, but I couldn't make sense of it. Too much was hitting me at once.

As I pushed past him, he pushed back, and I was trapped against the door jamb. I was ready to shove him away. I would have, if not for the look on his face. His surprise was gone, and he stared as if he'd been suddenly granted divine power to see straight past my anger and frustration. I had only a fleeting glimpse of his own unearthed emotions before I was pinned to the jamb by hands strong on my shoulders, lips on mine demanding another chance at that kiss. I gave it to him tentatively, not sure what I was doing. I'd come out of a dark room, into sunlight too bright to let me see anything. I was afraid to let its warmth pull me in, at least before I'd figured out just what I was feeling.

Casey's kiss grew gentle, and his grip loosened, arms sliding around my shoulders as he tipped his head, brow resting against mine. "Foster."

The rebuke was as gentle, and I knew it was for nothing that had come before. "A complication you don't need right now."

He exhaled a laugh. "A goddamned complication." He leaned against me all the more heavily.

"You did want a distraction."

"Sam's a distraction." He drew back, amusement in his eyes. "You're a . . ." He seemed stymied.

"An utter fool?"

The amusement deepened, along with curiosity. "You're *here*. And I don't really know why. If it's to apologize—"

"It is. But you dropped part of the file when you left." I followed him into the room, closing the door. "And—well, I was waiting for you—"

"And you didn't have anything else to do." He was at the desk, paging through the file. At last, he looked up. "Quite an apology," he said softly.

"I understand you've been having a difficult couple of weeks."

He broke from my gaze. "McGinley tell you that?"

"He said you'd moved your mother to a private home so she could be

looked after while you're at work."

He let out a breath as if relieved, but his shoulders sagged. "' Yes. She's—a little fragile."

She didn't seem to be the only one. I moved toward him, hand extended. "Truce?"

His brows lifted, along with the corners of his mouth. "You'll settle for a handshake? After that kiss?" He clasped my hand, drawing me closer as he did. "You think *I'll* settle for a handshake?"

"Complications," I reminded him.

He only grinned. "Priorities."

I could've argued that the hour was late and we both had to work tomorrow. I could've mentioned we were still battling for the same job and the eventuality of one of us being fired might end anything between us before it was well started. I thought about saying all that and more, but then he crushed his mouth on mine, and I found myself hoping none of those arguments occurred to *him*. There was no indication of it in the purposeful pulling away of my coat and vest, all the while he kissed me with an abandon that made clear the distraction he wanted. Sam might have served as well, I thought—then wished I hadn't.

"Casey . . ." He was pulling me toward the closed door on the other side of the sitting room, but a muffled hum against my cheek encouraged me to continue. "Sam—"

"He's a friend."

"But I'm—"

"Not even that." He blew out a laugh. "Three months ago, when we were in that crowded office, waiting on our interviews, and you squeezed past me with that wary look in your eyes—God, my hope winked right out because you looked like such a straight and narrow sort, I figured you as good as had the job." He stopped inside the doorway of a dim bedroom. "I'd been waiting four hours—oh, I know some of the guys had waited longer—but there wasn't much chatter. Everyone was anxious. A little grim about it. I was scared to death. My suit was so goddamned shabby, and I needed a haircut. And you fellows were all so polished . . ." His gaze dropped. "But I think you knew I was nervous. You smiled."

"You remember something like that?"

"I couldn't forget it. It gave me the spine to go in there and convince Mr. Leach I could do the work." He met my eyes. "I thought we'd be friends, but you *were* a straight and narrow sort. You've never approved of me. I know."

"Your work habits drove me mad, to be honest. But I suppose it was partly because I wasn't able to work the same way."

“My work habits?”

He was puzzled. I gave in to a laugh. “Well, you always seemed to be in conversation at someone else’s desk.” Everyone’s but mine.

His expression cleared. “I talk too much.”

“You flirt with the ladies—”

“You wanted me to flirt with you?”

“Of course not.”

“No?” Suddenly he was smiling.

I sought refuge in stern reproach. “No.”

“Not even once?” His breath was warm on my face, and I realized he’d had coffee with supper, no doubt expecting to be up late, working.

“I don’t know what I wanted,” I said—too softly, I thought, but then he nodded. “I came back last year, thinking I’d settle in and everything would be okay. But everything was different—or I was different. You know? I’d been picturing my life, but I lost the picture somewhere in France. Then I was sick, and when I came out of that, it seemed enough to be safe and well. And I think I—” I met his eyes. “I resented you for being more than that.”

“You thought I was doing all right.” He grinned, a fleeting one. “I put on a hell of a show, don’t I? ‘Smile, boys, that’s the style.’” His sigh was silent, but I felt him deflate against me. “I was in bed for weeks. They weren’t too sure I’d live, and they laid bigger odds against me walking again. I showed them . . .” He straightened up, a hard sparkle in his gaze. “My leg gave me hell at first, but it’s been improving. Give it some more time and it’ll be good as new.”

“I can be a dumb son of a bitch.” The real apology wouldn’t come. I felt so foolish already. “You should probably know that, if . . .”

“If?” He was going to make me spill the rest of it.

“If you’re going to flirt with me, too.”

“So you do want me to flirt with you.”

“I want you to . . .” *Forgive me.* “I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

“I’m sorry, too. About the comptometer . . .” He looked sheepish. “I guess I thought you might not really notice. And the thing was driving me wild. I’m so used to whipping through my work—and you’re so damned steady. About everything.” His fingers tangled in my hair, his mouth warming mine with a most expressive kiss. I felt forgiven.

But perhaps I just wanted to feel that way. “Casey—”

He shook his head. “You’re a smart son of a bitch, Foster. So am I. That’s where they messed up, pitting us against each other. We just ended up thinking we had to go after each other till only one was left standing.”

“We nearly did.”

His gaze drank me in with a look I couldn’t quite read—but liked all the

same. “We didn’t,” he said. “*You* didn’t. That fellow in the office who smiled at me, he’s still here.” He dropped one hand to poke me in the chest. “Right here.”

I knew all at once why I liked the look in his eyes. He was seeing me. And no one had seen me in such a long time. I’d only begun to see him clearly, and I wanted more of him, this man who could call himself gullible, yet appear to know me better than I knew myself. This man with his work desk full of toys—old toys he’d probably unearthed while packing his belongings and his mother’s. This man who was so certain his leg would be good as new and forgave me for ever believing otherwise.

After my impulsive pounce in the hallway, I’d allowed him to take the lead, and my blood was still pounding from it. Now, with my lips on his, I lingered, wanting to feel and taste him. We drifted through the dimness to a white counterpane and dropped together, reaching for each other’s buttons. Not far into the undertaking, he pushed me onto my back and reclaimed my mouth with a raw strength that promised to finish me. Though he was still clothed, the heat and muscle of his arms, his chest solid against mine—it took me over, and as much as I wanted him naked against me, I couldn’t stop him. He pushed a leg between mine, rocking, and the rush of sensation as I came bordered on unbearable.

“All right?” He was breathless, too, but I caught the amused, almost affectionate note.

“It’s been a while.”

“I guessed as much.” His thumb brushed the damp corner of my eye, and he kissed me lightly on the jaw. “Coming back to life—it smarts a little.”

I sucked in a breath and let it out on a laugh. “Smarts like hell. In every way.” But it felt damned good, all the same. “Casey . . .” Though I was well past any excuse for shyness, I felt self-conscious. “Why didn’t you just let me walk away?”

“After you kissed me?”

I nodded and his lips curved wickedly. “You can blame Louise.”

“Louise Nowell? What—”

“She called you the office curmudgeon. Our pet curmudgeon, I believe she said.” He eyed me with a more serious air. “I figured twenty-five was too young for that—”

“Twenty-four.”

“Even worse. But you didn’t seem to want to be friends, so I was ready to give up.” He threaded fingers in my hair and tugged gently in reproach. “Then you kissed me and—well, goddamn. They say you can tell a lot about a man by the way he kisses.” The grip in my hair loosened, fingers cradling

the nape of my neck. The blue eyes were as frank as ever. "I guess that includes whether or not he needs to be kissed back."

Shaken, I broke from his gaze. "You're taking pity on me, then."

His free hand circled my wrist, guiding my hand toward his open trousers and up against the solid length of his cock. "Does that feel like pity?"

I closed my hand around him, firming my grip, and his tightened convulsively on my wrist before letting go. My hesitant stroke made him groan, and he buried his face in my neck. "Speaking of pity . . ." He was gasping softly as he raised his head. "For God's sake, take it."

I rolled over, pinning him, and his hips rose, his cock a warm weight sliding in my grasp. He exhaled, hot and close, in my ear. "Knew you liked me . . . deep down."

I answered the joking tone with a stroke that made him snake both arms around me and drag me against his chest. Heartfelt encouragement—and something more. He *hadn't* been teasing. He liked me. He hoped I would like him as much . . . The thought overwhelmed me.

I could've liked him from the day we met. He hadn't prevented it. I had.

Now I was helpless against the desire to make up for it. I wanted to stay the night—hell, part of me hoped morning would never come. But it did, and the battle loomed, a battle for which I'd lost all heart. Casey was as quiet as I while we dressed, but at the door, he caught my arm. "You don't want to talk about this?"

"We might be smarter not to."

His mouth twisted. "Not even a good luck, may the best man win, and all that?"

I sensed he was trying not to grin. "May the better man, isn't it?"

He snorted, and the grin emerged. "The one with the working comptometer?"

"That would be me."

"Unless I beat you to the office."

"Ah, but I'm under doctor's orders not to run."

"Then I'll definitely beat you."

Laughing, I leaned in until we were nearly nose to nose. "Just try."

He swiftly blocked my exit with an arm and pressed warm lips to my ear. "Whatever happens . . . Meet me for supper? Six o'clock at Childs. The big one on Broadway."

By nightfall, one of us might well be jobless. I wanted to tell myself I didn't care. I had the feeling he was trying to convince himself of the same. "Supper. Come what may."

Slowed by my trip home to change my clothes, I walked into the office to find one of Mr. Templeton's tardy slips on my desk. Casey cast an impish glance my way. "Minutes wasted add up quickly, Mr. Wetherly."

I picked up the slip and tore it neatly in two. Then four. Then eight. Casey's eyes widened, and he shook his head just as I tossed the paper over my shoulder—and judging by the throat-clearing behind me, into Mr. Templeton's face.

"Mr. Wetherly, that late notice was for your edification. May I ask why you've ripped it up and hurled at me in this manner?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you were behind me."

"So I assumed. And the reason you destroyed it?"

"It wasn't relevant."

"I beg your pardon?"

Something contrary had gotten hold of me. "To the task at hand. Per your instructions, Mr. Templeton."

The low chatter around us had died away. Everyone seemed dumbfounded, all but Casey, who watched me with a narrowed gaze. He shook his head again, a warning I thought rather sweet. I'd made my choice.

"Mr. Templeton, I do apologize for tearing up the notice. Especially as I'm giving *you* notice that I no longer care to be your test subject. You've thrown me and Mr. Gladwin into a sort of no man's land, expecting only one of us to prove worthy of retaining this position. Mr. Leach said that if it didn't suit us to be so judged, we should request a character reference. You may not care to give me one." I shot Casey a resolute glance as he started to rise. "I have to be honest. I don't think this is a decent way to treat any of us. We all work like the devil. You may think turning us into automatons will spare Security Mutual a few of the troubles everyone's been facing, but in the end, it'll do more harm than good."

"Nonsense," Mr. Templeton sputtered. "There is always room for improvement, Mr. Wetherly. One must compete if one is to survive—"

"I'm familiar with the way the world works. Maybe I've just seen too much ugliness in the last couple of years. Too many good men set at odds because someone higher up thought it was the only way to fix things." He started to speak, and I raised a hand. "I'll save you wasting any more words on me. Mr. Leach is in his office, isn't he?"

"I believe so," Mr. Templeton said stiffly.

He didn't object as I headed for the elevator. Loud whispering went on behind me, and I did my best to ignore it. No one would stop me.

Except perhaps Casey. He reached the elevator as I did, clamping a hand on the gate before I could open it. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I didn't want to win the job that way."

“Did it occur to you I didn’t want to win it *this* way?”

It hadn’t. Nor had it occurred to me he’d be so angry. “This wasn’t an impulsive decision. I didn’t like being pitted against you. I didn’t like what I was willing to do to get you fired—”

“I told you last night none of that mattered. You did the right thing. You don’t have to quit out of guilt—”

“I’m not.” I lowered my voice. “All those weeks overseas, I was little more than a serial number. A number moved from one town to another, one trench to another. An expendable number facing the possibility of coming home in a pine box.” I pulled the gate wide and stepped into the elevator. “There has to be more to life than measurable benefits. What about values we can’t calculate in hours or dollars? If this is all we fought for . . .” My throat tightened, and I could only shake my head. Casey stared at me, seemingly speechless, as I jabbed the ground floor button. The ache in my throat was spreading to my chest, and I had no desire to see Mr. Leach or anyone else. I didn’t know where I was going. I just needed to go.

Lost in my thoughts, I wandered Manhattan until I was as lost in body. I took perverse pleasure in feeling even more displaced—and yet some still-practical side of me kept watch for help wanted signs. I’d wash dishes, paint rooms, maybe even clerk somewhere, and I’d get by. But if Dad were let go, it’d be a struggle for all of us.

I’d been hasty in quitting, but I couldn’t regret it. Casey needed the job. He’d come too close to that trip home in a pine box, and he was harboring plenty of his own worries. He also had his pride, and wounding it was the one thing I did regret. My attraction to him had taken me by surprise—but not as much as his to me. He’d been so sympathetic the night before, and I’d been clumsy and shy in trying to bring him the same pleasure. Still, he’d put himself cheerfully at my mercy until he had me convinced that no one, not even Sam, would have satisfied him so well. He’d joked that we’d both be fired in the morning, and he’d fallen asleep beside me as if we’d been together for ages.

The pleasure and comfort in that stayed with me all day. I didn’t want to lose it.

I didn’t want to lose him. In the busy, brightly-lit Childs, I took a table near the expanse of plate glass looking out onto Broadway and wondered what I might say to encourage him to give me another chance. I’d fallen out of practice with life—and each time I tried to step back in, I missed my footing. He’d forgiven me once. But now, as the hour slipped past and the crowd thinned without revealing Casey’s smiling visage, I acknowledged that maybe he’d had enough.

Settling the bill for my meager supper of toast and coffee, I started for

the subway, only to end up on a long, cold walk east. I couldn't go home and crawl into bed without knowing, one way or another, whether he wanted to see me again. Though I'd dealt myself enough blows for one day, I didn't care. Not knowing was worse.

I stood at his door for five minutes before finding the courage to knock. He might have company, he might be asleep, he might be too angry to talk to me . . .

He might be out. And I knew where. Even if I'd had the address, I could not intrude.

The weight of the day had grown in the past few hours, enough to bow my shoulders as I sought seclusion in a crowded train and then along a street too busy with cordial neighbors. Home loomed, but the sight didn't comfort me. I'd be sleeping with ghosts again, if I could sleep at all. I didn't recall smiling at Casey that day, three months ago. I'd been in no frame of mind for it. But something about him had probably drawn it out of me, despite my fear; the same something that was pulling me back into the rhythms of the world I'd left behind. He'd provoked and maddened and cajoled and encouraged, and in the end, it had been wonderful. At least for one night.

If there was comfort in knowing life could be wonderful again, I resisted it as I mounted the steps and felt around in my pocket for my house key. I did take some grim satisfaction in noting the porch light was off. My folks were out. I wouldn't have to face them till morning. As soon as I was employed, I had to get out on my own, even if that left me in the most wretched circumstance. In between missteps, I would surely find some solid ground.

My eyes burned. Goddamn my stupidity, anyway.

"Foster?"

The keys slipped out of my grasp and clattered to the ground. Trying to recover breath and voice, I peered into the dimness beyond the climbing nasturtiums and saw him on the porch swing—but only for an instant before he sprang up and bounded toward me. "Where on earth have you been? For God's sake." But he was smiling—no, grinning broadly as he grabbed my shoulders and leaned in, brow touching mine. His clandestine kiss. "I've been looking high and low. I was scared you'd left town."

"You've been looking for me?" I could manage nothing more intelligent. I was still reeling. "I thought—"

"Yeah, I know." He drew back, tilting his head, grin fading into a regretful smile. "I was sore at first. I'll admit I don't like anyone taking pity on me—"

"I wasn't—"

"No, but the situation I'm in, it made a difference. Maybe you hated the

way Mr. Leach went about choosing between us, but if you'd still been seeing me as the annoying son of a bitch who stole your comptometer, you would have stuck it out."

"I was a little impulsive. But I was glad to be." I wanted him to understand. "You don't realize how long I've been living with this terrible fear of—*everything*. I came home from France choked up with it. The world narrowed down around me—I let it—and I lived like that until Mr. Leach called us upstairs, and I had to fight for my job. And that I had to fight *you*—" I shook my head. "You seemed so well, so comfortable, so damned confident. I didn't like you very much for that, but the only person I had any right to be angry with was myself." I let my gaze drift, feeling ashamed again for the things I'd done. "And then you went and goddamned rescued me—"

"Like hell. You rescued yourself." Casey hesitated, and I caught the smile dawning. He leaned in, tone teasing. "Except for this afternoon, I guess I should say."

I'd never seen him look so happy. "For God's sake. What?"

"After you left, I tried to catch up to stop you from talking to Mr. Leach. Only you weren't upstairs, so I talked to Mr. Leach on my own."

As pleased as Casey seemed, I waited in dread for the rest. "Did you tell him I quit?"

"I told him you and I both knew what it was like in a world that valued efficiency over humanity. And in fact, we weren't the only ones among his employees who could describe that world to him in all its bloody detail. I told him I understood that he was looking after his company as he thought best, but I was a little too battle weary to turn against any more of my colleagues. Mr. Leach said he understood and asked if I would like to wait for a character reference or have it mailed."

"Oh, Casey—"

"Hold on a minute. That's merely Act One. When I went downstairs to clean out my desk—debating cleaning yours, as well—I was besieged by nearly everyone on the fourth floor, all of them desperate to hear if we'd both been fired. When I brought them up to date, well . . ." He grinned again suddenly. "Act Two. They marshalled the troops with a swiftness that would've made old Templeton weep."

"For you?"

"For us," Casey said gently. "They snuck away to say their piece to Mr. Leach. Templeton caught wind of it and . . ." He laughed. "You'll never believe—"

"You're driving me mad, you know."

Casey acknowledged it with a nod. "Act Three. Templeton went

upstairs and told Mr. Leach that apart from a few minor aberrations ostensibly induced by the conflict they'd created between us, you and I were two of the best, most capable employees in the company."

I had to gasp for breath. "And?"

"Mr. Leach came down to the fourth floor and announced no one else would be let go until he'd made a thorough review, decided what changes in direction might provide a more overall efficiency to take us through the new year—and we'd see how things progressed after that."

"You've still got your job, then."

Casey nodded. "And so do you."

"What? But—"

"You never officially quit." He put an arm around my shoulders and turned me toward the street. "We're both expected back tomorrow, bright and early."

In the road below, children were taking advantage of the deepening dusk with a noisy game of hide and seek, briefly interrupted by a streetcar letting loose weary souls in half-buttoned coats and wind-battered hats. But the chorus of cheery greeting that met their arrival and the warm lights beckoning from windows all along the road seemed to bolster flagging spirits and take them the rest of the way home.

"A nice little corner of the world," Casey said, glancing at me sidelong.

"Yes. I was thinking of moving."

"Someplace closer to work?"

"Closer. Yes."

"All alone?"

"Well—"

"It won't be as nice."

"No," I acknowledged. "Not as familiar. Or safe and tidy."

"You've had too good a look at my place," he said with a laugh.

"Possibly. Although there was something nice about your place. Something homey." I returned the sidelong glance. "Any rooms to let there?"

"Just one. But you might not like it. Your roommate would be this chatty fellow who's said to snore. He's no hand at keeping house and hasn't much in the way of furniture. And occasionally he gets caught up in things and clean forgets he's invited anyone to supper." Casey avoided my glance, but the grimace on his face was apology enough.

"Just remembered?"

The grimace grew more expressive. "Foster—"

"It's all right." I sidled nearer so I could slip fingers around his and squeeze.

He looked at me then and smiled sheepishly. “Told you you might not like it.”

I bumped my shoulder against his. “This fellow sounds all right. He makes up for any shortcomings by doing a good turn. A damned wonderful turn.”

“Well, life’s more interesting that way.” There was quiet appreciation in his voice. He gave my hand the smallest tug. “Come take a look at the place, and I can promise you a bite of supper in the bargain.”

Warm and beckoning. As an invitation back into the world, it suited.

I decided to take it.



About Tamara Allen

Tamara Allen lives in the piney woods north of Houston, Texas, where she spends her time on administrative work, taking care of her family, and writing when she gets the chance.

Contact

Website: writermara.wordpress.com

Email: writer.mara@gmail.com

Twitter: twitter.com/Mara_Allen



INTRODUCING
MR. WINTERBOURNE

by
Joanna Chambers

CHAPTER 1

“The toast of the ladies this season is the dashing Mr. W—. A certain Lady B— was recently overheard comparing him to Narcissus in his beauty. Her companion admonished her for comparing the gentleman to so conceited a creature and was heard to remind Lady B— of his recent honourable defence of his sister. When Mr. W— heard her name had been impugned in a gentlemen’s club, he challenged the offender to a bout of pugilism in Hyde Park and blackened the fellow’s eyes! Those who are observant may have noted the absence of one Lord E— from drawing rooms this past fortnight . . .

Sadly, Mr. W— is man of little fortune—his improvident father has reportedly all but emptied the family coffers, which is no doubt why Miss W— has just accepted the hand of the wealthy Mr. F—, lately of Manchester—a match that was apparently the subject of one Lord E—’s highly improper remarks and the cause of his recent inclemency . . .”

The London Lady, April 1821

The day on which Lysander Winterbourne’s life changed forever was, for the most part, a very ordinary one.

In the morning, he rose early and went for a bruising ride with his friend, Lord Perry Cavendish. He’d been stuck in Town for months, and it was good to get out into the country. Thankfully it wouldn’t be for much longer. In fact, he planned to be on his way to Winterbourne Abbey on the morrow, and to avoid coming back to Town for a good long while.

After a hearty gallop, Lysander and Perry partook of kippers and ale in their favourite inn, then drove Perry’s curricule out along the Brighton Road to watch a boxing match being held in an open field.

A quantity of ale was consumed—mainly by Perry—and they were very lucky he didn’t overturn his curricule on the way back to Town. By the time Lysander rolled back home, it was almost six o’clock.

“His Lordship has asked that you attend him in Her Ladyship’s private drawing room,” Quincey, his father’s humourless butler, informed Lysander. He delivered the news in a doom-laden tone, as though the purpose of Lysander’s father’s request was to deliver some terrible news, but Lysander had known old Quince for too many years to worry much about that.

When he entered the sitting room, it was to find his mother, Lady Jemima, reclining on a chaise longue, reading a novel, while his father sat, somewhat incongruously, at his wife's dainty escritoire, reading a letter, a frown on his face.

They both looked up at Lysander's entrance.

Lady Jemima, who at one-and-fifty was still beautiful, albeit somewhat rounder than the willowy subject of the portrait on the wall behind her, smiled warmly at him. He was her favourite child, the youngest of the family. Lord Winterbourne hadn't worn quite so well as his wife. Too many good dinners were stretching the limits of his plum-coloured waistcoat, and the blue eyes Lysander had inherited were rheumy from too many brandy-fuelled late nights at the tables.

"Lysander, darling," Lady Jemima said, putting down her book. An inveterately lazy woman, she made no move to rise but merely held her hands out, and Lysander stepped forward to take them, bending his head to press a quick kiss to each set of fine knuckles.

"Mama," he said. "You look lovely today."

It wasn't a lie, and besides, she loved compliments. His words made her beam with pleasure.

"Thank you, darling. Have you had a nice day? How is dear little Perry? Did he mention his mother? It's simply *years* since I've seen Annabelle Cavendish."

Lysander chuckled. "'Dear little Perry' is six foot two and weighs fourteen stone, Mama. And it's difficult to get more than a grunt out of him, never mind news of his mother."

Lady Jemima looked surprised. "Really? It doesn't seem so very long since the two of you nearly set the stables at Winterbourne Abbey on fire."

"For goodness sake, Mimi," Lord Winterbourne sighed. "That was ten years ago."

Lady Jemima looked comically surprised.

"Quince told me you wanted to talk to me," Lysander said to the earl, taking the chair next to the escritoire and stretching out his long legs. "Was it something in particular?"

"Ah," said Lord Winterbourne. He cleared his throat. "Yes, it is rather."

He sounded so serious that Lysander was struck by a sudden worry that this was going to be a repeat of their discussion from last week. Recently his father had taken it into his head that Lysander needed to be settled in life. His eldest brother Alexander would inherit the title—for what it was worth these days—and Hector was in the army. Lysander was the only one of the Winterbourne boys who lacked a neatly mapped-out future—though not for want of ideas on his part. He wanted nothing more than to help manage the

estate he'd grown up on and had firmly told his father so last week.

In response, the earl had raised the prospect of Lysander taking orders in the Church of England. When Lysander had protested that he had no calling whatsoever, his father had waved his objections away—who needed a vocation to join the Church of England? Especially when one's cousin Henry (once removed) was a bishop? But Lysander had argued and begged and cajoled and pleaded until, eventually, his father had reluctantly agreed to allow Lysander to return to Winterbourne Abbey and to try out working with Mr. Holmes, the estate manager. And finally, tomorrow, Lysander was due to leave.

"I need your assistance with something," the earl said. "It won't take more than a day or two."

Lysander's immediate reaction to those words was a wary sort of relief. This didn't sound like a repeat of their last conversation at any rate.

"Oh yes?"

"It's nothing difficult," the earl went on in an airy tone. "I'd just like you to spend a day or two with Mr. Freeman. Show him around Town a little. Help him get a bit more comfortable in Society."

For a moment, Lysander just stared at his father, trying to make sense of what the man had just said.

"Simon?" he asked, puzzled. "Why would he need showing around?"

Simon Freeman had become engaged to Lysander's sister Althea two months before. The earl had been part horrified, part delighted by the match. On the one hand, as the son of a mill owner, Simon Freeman was tainted by commerce and was a humiliatingly low match for Lord Winterbourne's eldest daughter—the earldom was four hundred years old after all, and Lysander's mother's ancestors had come to England with William the Conqueror. On the other hand, Simon's family was outrageously wealthy, and the earl needed money desperately. Before Simon had come along, he'd even been considering selling the Abbey.

It wasn't going to be a one-sided bargain. Simon had political ambitions. Marriage into the Winterbourne clan would considerably smooth his entry to the inner circles of political power.

"No, not Simon." The earl sighed impatiently. "He hardly needs anyone to show him around—no, I mean his brother, *Adam* Freeman. He's come to Town for a few weeks." The earl grimaced. "Unfortunately, he's staying on till May for the wedding."

Lysander blinked, trying to remember what he'd heard about Adam Freeman. He was Simon's older brother and the head of the Freeman family. It was Adam who held the purse strings, not Simon. Simon might be independently wealthy thanks to a generous settlement in his late father's

will, but Adam was the one who had taken over the running of his father's businesses and who continued to grow the Freeman empire. And crucially, it was Adam who'd bought out the mortgages over the earl's estates and cleared his towering pile of debts. The earl had complained bitterly of the unpleasant afternoon he'd recently had to spend with the man, going through them all.

"Insufferable money-grubber," he'd said. *"You should've seen how much he enjoyed rubbing my nose in it."*

And now he wanted Lysander to squire the man around?

"Well?" the earl prompted, interrupting Lysander's tumbling thoughts.

"I thought we were agreed that I could go back to the Abbey for a few months?" Lysander answered carefully. "I was planning on leaving tomorrow. Holmes and I were going to sit down together on Friday to discuss some of the alterations that are needed to the dairy and what can be done about improving the tenants' cottages—now that we've got some funds, I mean."

Funds from Adam Freeman, that was.

The earl's lips thinned with displeasure. "Well, that was before Simon asked that you show his brother around. Keeping Freeman happy is rather more important than mending a few cottages, Lysander." He turned back to the papers on the desk and began to fiddle with them. "Besides, on reflection, I think it best that you—well, step back from estate business."

For a few long beats, Lysander just stared at his father in silence, his heart beginning to pound, a sick feeling growing in his stomach.

"What do you mean?" he said at last, hating the break he heard in his own voice. The unmistakable edge of disappointment. "Father, I—I don't understand. I thought we agreed that I would work with Holmes for a few months, start learning how to manage the estate—"

"Yes, well, I've been reflecting on that, and I've come to the view that I should never have agreed to such a plan," the earl said. He kept his gaze averted, refusing to meet Lysander's eyes. "Ultimately, the Abbey's going to Alexander. He's the one who needs to learn to look after it."

"But he's not interested!"

Alexander was just like their father—he'd squander everything at the tables, and it would all go to rack and ruin if someone else didn't manage the place—preferably someone with the ability to put their foot down with Alexander from time to time.

"Nevertheless," the earl bit out, "Alexander is—"

"I don't want to be in *charge*, if that's what you're thinking," Lysander interrupted desperately. He put his elbows on the desk and leaned forward, trying to catch his father's eye, but the earl kept his gaze stubbornly averted.

"I don't mind just managing the estate for Alexander!"

"It's not that," the earl snapped. "The point is this: your brother is the heir. He will deal with the estate as he sees fit. Your path in life will be different. I've spoken with Henry—"

"I told you I don't want to join the church!"

"Yes, you said so. Nevertheless, I've spoken to Henry and invited him to dine with us next week. I want you to hear him out." The earl paused, then added flatly, "It's a respectable, proper career for a younger son."

"And it'll improve your marriage prospects, darling," the countess put in. "I would so like to see you married to a nice young lady."

Lysander felt like he couldn't breathe. He tugged at the neck of his cravat. "Mother," he said. "Please. You know how I feel about this."

Lady Jemima made a sympathetic pout. "Oh, darling," she said. "Yes, you always *did* love being outdoors, but there's no reason you couldn't ask for a position in some pretty village somewhere! Some of the houses the Church provides are really very sizeable—just the thing for a young married couple. Why, the old vicarage near the Abbey must have five bedchambers at least!"

"That's not what I meant—" Lysander began, frustrated. So typical of his mother. Thinking of what she wanted for him, rather than what would make *him* happy. As if he wanted to be married!

"I know, dearest," she said, her tone dripping with sympathy. "You've always liked mucking about with horses and mud, haven't you? Just like when you were a little boy. But you see, you can't be a boy forever . . ."

Mucking about with horses and mud. That was what she thought he meant.

She'd never understand. No more than the earl did. In their minds, the world was fixed. Immutable. As was his place in it.

Distantly, Lysander realised that he'd been expecting this. Waiting for it. He'd known during his conversation with the earl last week that his father wasn't happy with what they'd agreed.

This had always been coming. He was just as trapped as he'd always been. Dependent on a father who couldn't stay away from the gaming tables. Fit for nothing but whatever occupation his father might obtain for him by grace and favour.

"So," the earl said briskly, interrupting Lysander's thoughts. "Can I rely on you to show Freeman around? Simon did particularly ask that it be you. He probably thinks that if people believe *you* like Mr. Freeman, they might warm to him a little more themselves." He gave a humourless laugh. "As if you'd ever respect a man like that. He practically reeks of his filthy mills."

Lysander couldn't bring himself even to look at his father or

acknowledge his vitriolic remarks.

“Well, Lysander?” the earl prompted sharply. “Will you do it? God knows, we’ll probably have to go back to the man with a begging bowl soon enough. I’ve just had a letter from Holmes to say the roof on the west wing of the Abbey is leaking badly.”

A small, disloyal voice in Lysander’s head whispered that if the earl hadn’t squandered the family fortunes at the gaming tables and had instead mended the roof of the west wing ten years ago when it had *started* leaking, they wouldn’t have been having this conversation now. But he didn’t say anything. There was no point—it wasn’t as though anything he said would change the earl’s mind.

“All right,” he said flatly, not really caring anymore. “I’ll do it.”

It wasn’t as though he would have any better use for his time, was it?

The earl nodded, pleased at last.

“Good man,” he said heartily. “I won’t pretend it’ll be an easy few days—Freeman’s a thoroughly disagreeable fellow, but if anyone can manage him, it’s you. You always could charm the birds from the trees, my boy.”

CHAPTER 2

Adam Freeman scowled at the front door of the Winterbourne townhouse. It had recently been painted in bright bottle green. A lion’s head door knocker gleamed at him with brassy impudence.

Adam wondered if Lord Winterbourne had actually paid the painter yet. Another sheaf of bills had been delivered to him yesterday, some of them shockingly old and for tragically small amounts—bills that should have been given to him already. Did the earl ever think of the tradesmen and suppliers who waited months on end for payment? Did he spare a thought for their wives and children? Did it occur to him that his actions might force some of them into a debtors’ prison?

What manner of man lived like a king and didn’t pay his bills?

Lord Winterbourne’s approach to life was entirely at odds with how Adam had been raised. His father would be turning—whirling—in his grave right now, to see his sons cultivating such a man.

Damn Simon and his ambitions. Simon and his *“If I want to change things, I need to be accepted by these people.”*

Sometimes it seemed to Adam that Simon was changing before his very eyes, turning into the sort of man he’d always professed to despise. Was that what compromise did to a man? And if so, what did that say about Adam himself, who had come here today to spend the day with Lysander

Winterbourne, the youngest—and arguably most useless—of the whole sorry Winterbourne clan?

Firming his lips, Adam took a hold of the brass lion head and delivered three sharp raps. The door swung open almost immediately, revealing the lugubrious countenance of Lord Winterbourne's miserable butler.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said. "His Lordship and Mr. Winterbourne are expecting you. Please follow me."

The butler's invitation was delivered in accents that could only be described as tragic—Adam half expected to be shown into a room containing Lysander Winterbourne on his deathbed, the earl weeping at his side, but instead the unsmiling servant led him to a bright and sunny drawing room.

The earl was pacing in front of the fireplace, wearing a hole in the rug. He looked up at Adam's entrance with an expression Adam had come to loathe. A flicker of dislike, quickly disguised by a fawning expression that turned his stomach. He walked forward to greet Adam.

"Mr. Freeman," he said. "How good to see you again. May I introduce my son?"

It was only then that Adam noticed the second occupant of the room. He'd been sitting in the corner, reading a newspaper, but now he was standing and tossing his reading material aside, stepping forward with a ready smile to greet Adam.

"Lysander Winterbourne," he said, offering his hand. "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Freeman."

His elegantly cut coat was dark blue, his neatly tailored waistcoat and trousers fawn. The starched white linen about his throat was tied in a complicated arrangement that somehow didn't make him look in the least bit dandyish. He looked altogether . . . perfect. The sole bit of untidiness about him was a single unruly lock of golden hair that flopped over his forehead, and even that only served to make him more appealing. He was the very picture of easy English privilege.

And looking at him made Adam's cock stiffen uncomfortably in his breeches.

Adam had no choice but to take Winterbourne's hand. He'd removed his gloves as he followed the butler down the corridor—he hated wearing the damn things—but now he wished he'd kept them on. He felt stupidly aware of the warmth of Winterbourne's skin, the pleasant strength of the man's grip.

Adam pressed his lips together and tried to lock his wayward reaction to Winterbourne away, forcing himself to give the man a curt nod.

"Winterbourne."

Winterbourne's smile faltered a little. Their hands fell apart, returning to their respective sides, and a brief awkward silence descended.

The earl was the first to break it. "I gather you're going to be staying in town for a little while, Freeman?"

Adam nodded. "Till after the wedding," he said.

"Simon thought it might be nice—if it's not too boring for you—if Lysander showed you around Town a little. Introduced you to some more people, that sort of thing."

The earl was smiling like a damn fool, a hopeful, ingratiating look on his face that didn't quite mask his lingering resentment towards Adam. Adam felt like telling him in no uncertain terms that he had no wish to meet another single member of the bloody aristocracy, thank you very much, but he didn't. Simon had pleaded with him to make the effort.

"Please try, Adam. Just this once. After the wedding, you'll never need to bother again."

He wasn't entirely sure why Simon wanted him to bother now. He'd offered to stay away altogether, but for all Simon's complaints about Adam's scowling countenance, he seemed determined that Adam should not only be at the wedding, but that he should take a prominent part in it.

"Who else would I have stand at my side on the most important day of my life than my own brother?"

And that was all it took, apparently, for Adam to give way.

"I'm sure it won't be boring at all," he replied dutifully. In fact, he was quite sure it would be more boring than he could possibly imagine. He turned his attention to the son. "What did you have in mind, Mr. Winterbourne?"

The perfect English gentleman cleared his throat.

"Well," he began, "I thought we could pay some calls this afternoon, if you're agreeable?"

Calls. Yes, Adam remembered how well the last ones had gone, with the collected cream of Society all looking at him and Simon like a couple of talking dogs. Lovely.

He forced himself to smile. His smile was a poor thing—tight and insincere—but it was the best he could do in the circumstances. "Whatever you think, Winterbourne. I'm in your hands."

Winterbourne's cheeks pinked. "Ah, excellent," he said. "I've—ah, also taken the liberty of asking Lady Prentice if I might take you as my guest to a ball she's hosting this evening. She was only too happy to have another gentleman guest."

Adam hated balls above all things. "How kind," he said woodenly. "Thank you."

“Well,” the earl said, rubbing his hands together. “I’ll let you two get on, then. It sounds like you’ve got lots to do.”

He couldn’t have made his eagerness to escape clearer. Irritation surged in Adam. The man had sent him a sheaf of bills totalling nine hundred and forty-two pounds yesterday, and now he was blatantly pawning Adam off on his son. And as pleased as Adam was to avoid spending more time in the man’s company, he resented being treated so poorly.

“Wait a moment,” Adam said, his tone deliberately high-handed. And quite deliberately leaving off the earl’s honorific. He refused to call the man *my lord*. Bad enough that Adam was paying off the fool’s debts.

The earl halted mid-step. He did not look pleased. “Yes?”

“I received another packet of bills from you yesterday,” Adam said. “Which was something of a surprise. I thought I made it clear we were to go through everything on Monday.”

The earl’s face flamed with what looked to be mingled anger and mortification. “Well, there were a few I missed. My apologies”—he didn’t sound the least bit sorry—“I thought we had an understanding.”

“Our *understanding* was that the items you showed me on Monday disclosed the total sum of your debts.”

If anything, the earl’s face flamed harder, and the son looked mortified too. He glanced to the side, as though to pretend he wasn’t hearing this.

“Fine,” the earl snapped. “By all means deliver them back to me.”

“Oh, you have a thousand pounds to spare just now do you?” Adam asked, raising his eyebrows. When the earl flushed and looked away, Adam nodded. “I thought not. Well, I’m not about to let your tailor starve because you can’t manage your affairs, but there has to be a limit.” He heard the son give a slight gasp at his bluntness, but didn’t even pause. “You have until tomorrow at four o’clock to present your remaining bills to my secretary, Lord Winterbourne. Anything you pass over by then will be paid. However, let us be clear on this: that will be the end of it. You will not get a penny more from me. My brother’s happiness is important to me, but he has cost me very dearly with this match.”

The earl’s face went purple with anger, but he nodded. “Very well. Then, I’ll see to it now. Good day, Freeman.”

Without waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and strode away, closing the door sharply behind him.

Silence.

Adam turned to look at his escort for the day. Lysander Winterbourne was staring at him, wide-eyed, and Adam wondered what the young man was thinking.

He probably thought Adam was a perfect boor. He probably thought

Adam should just meekly hand his money over for Lord Winterbourne to squander for the favour of his insipid sister's hand.

Winterbourne gave a stiff and very awkward smile.

"Shall we go?" he suggested. "I thought we might call on my sister, Lady Hazlett. You met her at the engagement ball, I'm sure?"

Adam remembered her—she was the oldest Winterbourne sibling, and although she looked rather like her younger brother, she was not beautiful, as he was.

"Very well," he said. "If we must."

He realised he sounded ungrateful, and for a moment—when he saw how Lysander Winterbourne's face fell at his brusque words—he even regretted it. But the fact was, he *wasn't* grateful, and for good reason.

Lysander Winterbourne would no doubt have a day or two of discomfort squiring him around. Well, it was probably the first bit of work—if you could call such a thing work—that the man had ever had to do.

Perhaps it would do a Winterbourne good to think of someone else's preferences for once in his life.

CHAPTER 3

By their fourth afternoon call, Lysander was flagging.

Simon's brother was taciturn. He was cold and proud, and at times he bordered on being actively rude. Lysander was on tenterhooks, wondering what he might say.

Lysander already knew just how blunt the man was capable of being. To the end of his days, Lysander would never forget seeing his father scolded like a naughty schoolboy in his own drawing room. It had been a frank display of power by Freeman over the earl, and it had provoked a mix of responses in Lysander. Shock, of course, and outrage. And other, more troubling feelings he didn't care to think about.

Since Freeman made little effort to be amiable during their calls, Lysander felt obliged to be twice as charming as usual. But he couldn't escape the feeling that his efforts were wasted. They were on their fourth visit now, and after several hours of introducing his reluctant charge to people he'd known for years, Lysander had to admit that it was becoming clear to him why Freeman remained so very tight-lipped and grim.

It was impossible to miss the incredulous looks that came their way, the muttering as they approached. Even worse were the openly snide remarks about the vulgarity of commerce. Most mortifying of all, when Lysander had introduced Freeman to his great aunt, Lady Beresford, the old witch had

pursed her thin lips, averted her gaze and offered the man two fingers to shake, a calculated insult. Lysander had wanted to die.

Lysander could just imagine what they'd be saying after he and Freeman left each house. They'd put on a show of pitying Lysander for having to put up with a presumptuous social climber and agree the man was insufferable. They'd probably say the same sort of things Lysander's own father had.

"He practically reeks of his filthy mills."

Right now, Lysander and Freeman were on opposite sides of the room. Freeman stood near the fireplace, a silent and barely tolerated bystander in a group of four gentlemen. His lips were pressed together, his expression distinctly unimpressed as he listened to The Honourable Freddy Leighton braying about something or other.

Lysander wondered why on earth Freeman had agreed to this. He was clearly hating every minute. Simon might not mind being patronised and despised—Lysander had been out with him often enough to know that much—but his older brother did. Adam minded a great deal.

He simmered with hot, angry, *palpable* resentment.

"Your Mr. Freeman is very handsome," a light, feminine voice said in his ear.

Lysander turned his head to see Perry's sister standing at his shoulder. Lady Arabella Cavendish was nineteen and impishly pretty in sprigged muslin.

"He's not my Mr. Freeman, Bella," Lysander said in a repressive tone.

Arabella ignored him. "He looks like a hero from a novel. All brooding and serious."

Lysander had to admit she was right. Freeman was tall, an inch or two over six feet, a hand span more than Lysander's respectable five foot eight. Broad through the shoulders and lean hipped, he was a fine figure of a man, his clothes elegant but sober. His thick, dark hair was cut very short, hugging his well-shaped head and lending him a strong, uncompromising profile, and his sherry-brown eyes were sharply intelligent.

"Mama says he's as rich as Croesus," Arabella added dreamily.

"Arabella—" Lysander kept his voice low but injected a warning note. He'd known Arabella her whole life and was well aware of her tendency to speak her mind. It was the sort of trait that could result in a young lady being labelled as fast, affecting her prospects for making a decent marriage. "Your mother would have your hide if she could hear you."

She snorted in a most unladylike way. "You should hear what she says behind closed doors. Father can't afford another season for me after this one—they need me to marry money. Mama would tie me up in pink ribbon and

send me to Mr. Freeman on a silver platter if she thought it would net me a proposal from the man, whatever his pedigree might be.”

“For God’s sake, Bella!” Lysander hissed.

“I can’t say I’d mind myself,” she went on, unrepentant. “He’s a handsome devil. I wouldn’t care about being shunned by the *ton* if it meant acquiring a husband who looks like that. The only admirer I’ve got at the moment is Sir Toby Edwards, and he’s sixty if he’s a day.” She sighed.

Lysander just shook his head, reluctantly amused, and let his gaze wander back to the subject of their conversation.

Freeman might be rude and blunt, but Arabella was absolutely right about him being handsome. Lysander liked the man’s sleek cap of hair. Liked too those straight, dark brows, even though they kept pulling together in a frown. Liked even more the intense amber gaze that reminded him of a bird of prey. Singular and unblinking.

“You’re staring,” Arabella murmured in his ear.

Lysander was mortified to feel a blush spreading over his face and quickly looked away.

“I wasn’t staring,” he muttered. “I was just lost in thought.”

Just then, Freeman broke away from the group of gentlemen he’d been speaking with. He walked over to Lysander and Arabella, his step decisive, lips still pressed together.

“Mr. Winterbourne,” he said when he reached them, his voice clipped. “I fear we must be wearing out our welcome. We’ve been imposing on Mrs. Dalton’s hospitality too long.”

Lysander glanced at the clock. They’d only arrived twenty minutes ago.

“Of course,” he said smoothly. “Let us take our leave of our hostess, then.”

A sharp little elbow dug into Lysander’s side.

“Oh, sorry”—he sent Freeman an apologetic look—“before we leave, may I present Lady Arabella Cavendish?”

Arabella smiled brightly and pronounced herself delighted to make Mr. Freeman’s acquaintance. Oh well, at least one person had been welcoming to Freeman, even if it happened to be someone who was looking for a rich husband.

No sooner had Freeman murmured a polite sentiment in response than Arabella launched into an interrogation, asking him what he thought of London and its many sights and splendours.

For a while, Freeman tolerated her attentions, answering her tumbling questions politely, but eventually he grew bored. Lysander saw it by the faint frown that appeared between his dark brows and the increasingly curt answers he gave her. Plainly, he had no interest in this passably pretty and

well-bred girl. No interest in being flattered and flirted with. When he next glanced at Lysander, the cold resentment of that tawny gaze was slightly softened by an unmistakable plea.

“Sorry to interrupt, Bella,” Lysander said, “But I’m afraid I’m going to have to steal Mr. Freeman away now. We have another appointment that we cannot be late for.”

Arabella eyed him in a calculating way. “Is that so?” she said. “And what appointment would that be, Mr. Winterbourne?”

“With my fencing master,” Lysander said promptly. “It’s time for my weekly lesson, and Mr. Freeman is keen to meet the great Monsieur Gris.”

Later, Lysander wondered where that egregious lie had come from, but for now, all that mattered was that Arabella’s suspicious look melted away, replaced by resignation. She bid the two men a civilised farewell, and they crossed the room to take their leave of Mrs. Dalton.

CHAPTER 4

“Do you really have an appointment with your fencing master?” Freeman asked once they were on the street outside. It was the most the man had unbent all day, and Lysander found himself smiling ruefully.

“No, but you obviously wanted to leave, and it was the only thing I could think of on the spur of the moment.”

Freeman gave a short laugh, but he looked disappointed. “Pity,” he said. “I’ve heard of Gris. Going to his academy would be infinitely preferable to making another call.”

“Well,” Lysander said, thinking on his feet, “there’s no reason we can’t drop by. Monsieur Gris may have lessons on, but we could watch. Maybe even have a bout if the place isn’t too busy. Do you fence?”

Freeman blinked, seeming surprised by Lysander’s offer. “Yes,” he said at last. “Yes, I fence. I haven’t for a while, but I’m a tolerable swordsman.”

Lysander grinned, pleased by the turn of events. “Well, good, then! Let’s go. It’s not far at all from here. A mile or so, if you don’t mind the walk?”

“I’d welcome it,” Freeman replied. “I feel like I’ve been cooped up in stuffy drawing rooms all day.”

“Excellent,” Lysander said. “Monsieur Gris’s rooms are just off Mayfair. It’s this way.” He turned on his heel and started walking, and Freeman followed, falling into step beside him.

“I appreciate this,” Freeman said after a brief silence. “It’s been a long day.”

"It's the least I can do after subjecting you to so many afternoon calls," Lysander said, shrugging. Then he added lightly, "Though whether you'll enjoy being soundly beaten remains to be seen."

Freeman met his sideways look with a wry smile of his own. "You think you will soundly beat me, do you?"

"It's been said that I'm not too shabby with a blade," Lysander replied modestly.

"Simon said you were something of a sportsman," Freeman admitted. "But perhaps I will surprise you." There was just the slightest edge to the man's voice—a hint of combativeness that made Lysander's own competitive streak prickle.

"Perhaps," he said, and he shrugged, hinting at disbelief just to rile the man. Everyone thought Lysander Winterbourne was the most amiable man in London, but he liked to win, and he had sneaky ways of getting under his opponents' skin.

"Perhaps you believe that fencing is a gentleman's sport?" Freeman said. "And that a man like myself could never measure up to a *gentleman's* skill?"

Lysander's step faltered, and he stopped, right in the middle of the street. "Oh, no, I didn't mean that at all—"

Freeman stopped too, and it was only then that Lysander saw that the man's lips were twitching.

"Were you jesting with me?" Lysander asked, astonished.

"Perhaps," Freeman replied. He raised a teasing brow, lips curving deeply into an amused smile.

Lysander stared at him, amazed. All day, the man had been glaring and frowning, but when he smiled, he was entirely different. The lines of discontent that pleated his brow smoothed out, and his golden eyes danced with merriment. He seemed younger than he had before. Carefree now.

Was this really the man who had looked down his nose at Lysander's father earlier? Who had told the man off for not paying his tailor?

It was in that moment, looking at Adam Freeman, that Lysander finally put a name to one of the more troubling feelings that the brief, painful interview between his father and Freeman had provoked in him. It was an emotion he'd felt again this afternoon as he watched Freeman being snubbed, over and over.

Shame.

Shame over his family's unpaid bills.

Shame over the shabby behaviour of people he'd considered friends.

"Well, I shouldn't have blamed you if you *had* been serious," he blurted out now. "Not after the treatment you've had today. I'd apologise if I

thought it would do any good. I *do* apologise, in fact.”

For a long moment, Freeman just stared at Lysander. He seemed shocked, truly shocked, by Lysander’s words.

“Have I spoken out of turn?” Lysander asked. “If so—”

“No, I—” Freeman fell silent, then started again. “I was just—surprised. I wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

“Say what?”

“Apologise to me.”

“Weren’t you?” Somehow that made Lysander feel awful, and he found he wanted Freeman to understand exactly how sorry he was. “I was mortified this afternoon. I suppose I must have witnessed this sort of thing before—perhaps I noticed it more acutely because you were my guest. I’m very sorry you were subjected to it.”

He went to start walking again, but Freeman touched his arm, stopping him.

“Have you never attended such a gathering with Simon? I can’t imagine he’d have been treated much better than I was.”

Lysander thought about that. “Perhaps I didn’t notice so much with Simon because *he* didn’t seem to mind—he accepted their insults, and I think they were less awful to him because of it.” He paused, then forced himself to be honest. “They saw that *you* minded, and they wanted to punish you for having the presumption to feel insulted.” Lysander paused and looked away, swallowing. “I’m ashamed to be one of them.”

For a long moment, Freeman was silent. Then he said, very quietly, “Thank you, Mr. Winterbourne. That was a handsome apology, particularly considering the offence was not yours. You have made me ashamed of my own behaviour. My . . . brusqueness towards you”—he paused before adding —“and your father. I hope you will accept my apology in turn.”

Lysander smiled. His heart felt lighter already. “I will accept it with good grace, Mr. Freeman, though I think you have little to apologise for. Now, shall we repair to Monsieur Gris’s and see who is the better swordsman?”

“By all means, Winterbourne.” Freeman smiled. “Lead on.”



Monsieur Gris was a trim, silver-haired man of around fifty. He spoke excellent English, with the merest hint of a French accent. His father had been a fencing master too, and Gris had followed in his footsteps, taking over the school his father had established and adding more rooms and more students.

He specialised, he told Adam, in the more advanced students, like Lysander Winterbourne.

They were standing at the back wall together—Adam and Gris—watching Lysander and another of the fencing master's dedicated students fight, blades flashing as they lunged and feinted and parried, their feet beating out swift, irregular rhythms on the wooden floor.

"Mr. Jessop is quite good," the fencing master said in a low tone, "but don't be deceived—Mr. Winterbourne is holding back considerably." He arched a brow at Adam. "Even at half strength, he is a pure pleasure to watch though, don't you agree? His form is beautiful. Oh, look! Did you see that *croisé*?"

Lysander Winterbourne's opponent stepped back and lowered his sword, acknowledging a point, and the two men moved apart, taking up their starting positions again. Adam tracked Winterbourne with his gaze. He'd discarded his jacket, and in his skin-tight breeches and waistcoat, he was trim and handsome.

"Yes," Adam murmured. "Beautiful form."

The two men saluted one another with their blades and began again, and it was another dazzling display of attacks and counterattacks, swift and glittering and intent. At the end of it, Jessop accepted defeat, grimacing a little, but good-humoured enough, and offered his blade to Adam.

"Are you going to try to best him?" he asked, arching a brow.

Adam glanced at Winterbourne, who smiled at him, a slow, challenging smile that made his absurdly handsome face even more appealing.

"Come on, Freeman," he said. "Let's see what you've got."

"Very well," Adam said. He didn't take the blade from Jessop immediately. Instead he removed his coat and put it to one side, taking his time. He was conscious of the other three men watching him, mostly Winterbourne, with that devil-may-care smile of his.

After he accepted the blade, he took a few moments to learn its weight and shape, moving it from hand to hand, carrying out a few exploratory slashes and thrusts. Gris watched him, his gaze considering, but giving nothing away of his thoughts.

"Take your positions, gentlemen," was all he said, then simply, "*En garde*."

Adam was a good swordsman, but he wasn't as good as Winterbourne. He already knew that, just from watching him fight Jessop at half strength. He suspected too that Winterbourne was not an entirely ruthless opponent. That he would give Adam one chance at least, at the start of the bout. He would give him that chance with all the magnanimity of a man who knew himself near unbeatable.

So Adam took it.

His initial lunge was explosive, a powerful surge of strength that took Winterbourne by surprise. It gave him a half second of an advantage—less—before his blade struck the other man's and the bout was underway.

The next few minutes were frenzied, Adam moving on pure instinct as their weapons clashed and scraped, working in opposition and in accord too. Adam knew that there were times when it was more intelligent to yield than to hold firm—knew too that the moments in a bout on which victory pivoted were not always won by brute force. But the fact was, he *only* knew. With Winterbourne, it was more than knowing. He *understood* those moments, had an instinct for how to play them, his body seeming to move almost without thought.

Adam fought hard, but he was no match for his younger opponent. As he realised the extent of that truth, his grin grew till he was laughing aloud, simply admiring Winterbourne's skill as the man sliced effortlessly through Adam's best swordplay, trying to keep the bout going as long as possible for no reason other than to prolong the mad joy of it.

Winterbourne began to grin too, his face flushed with enjoyment, cornflower-blue eyes bright and happy. That unruly lock of golden hair tumbled over his forehead, making him look carefree. Tempting. Adam wanted nothing more than to throw his sword aside and take the man in his arms. Kiss him senseless till they were both panting. Instead he kept fighting. Kept thrusting and parrying till Winterbourne finally did the inevitable, landing a hit on Adam's shoulder, the *fleuret* of his foil pushing bluntly into Adam's shoulder, making the blade bend in an outrageous, glinting arc.

They both halted, panting madly, grinning at each other while Gris and Jessop laughed, applauding their appreciation.

"*Extraordinare!*" Gris exclaimed. "So fast! You are a well-matched pair." He took Adam's foil from him and clapped him on the shoulder. "You will have to come back and demonstrate again when I have more students here. There are not many who can give Monsieur Winterbourne a run for his money! I am ever struggling to find him worthy opponents."

"He is much better than I," Adam said, catching Winterbourne's eye. "I cannot call myself a worthy opponent."

"Are you joking?" Winterbourne sputtered. "You nearly overcame me in the first two seconds. I've never seen anything so fast in my life!"

Gris laughed. "He's fierce," he said, turning aside to hand the foils to Jessop. "Like a Bengal tiger."

"I see the resemblance," Winterbourne agreed. He looked Adam up and down, raising one provocative brow, and Christ, the look on his face—

amused, admiring—it went straight to Adam’s cock.

Stupidly he shifted, seeking to disguise his body’s response. Of course, it only served to draw Winterbourne’s attention, and his gaze duly dropped, the minute widening of his eyes confirming that, yes, he had noticed. But then how he could not, given how tight Adam’s breeches were, and how much his cock had swelled?

Thank God Gris and Jessop were busy putting the equipment away, at least.

Flustered, Adam turned away, reaching for his coat and tugging it on, buttoning himself up with stiff, jerky movements. What must Winterbourne be thinking of him?

CHAPTER 5

“So,” Freeman said, once they were outside, “what time shall I call on you this evening for Lady Prentice’s ball?”

He was back to being stiff and severe again, probably because of that odd moment after their bout. Lysander hadn’t been quite sure what to make of it—sometimes these things happened between men, when they fought. It didn’t necessarily mean anything.

But perhaps it did?

He found himself thinking of how Freeman had looked during that spirited battle, the way he’d come to sudden, vivid life, laughing without inhibition, eyes dancing with pure enjoyment as they thrust and parried.

His smile.

It was that more than anything—more than the sight of the man’s stiff member in his tight breeches—that made Lysander’s heart speed up now. That made him suddenly reluctant to part from Freeman and risk losing that tentative connection.

“Why don’t you join me for an early dinner at my club first?”

Freeman had been consulting his pocket watch, but at Lysander’s invitation his gaze snapped up, eyes wide with astonishment—it seemed that Lysander had confounded him again.

“All right.” Freeman sounded a little surprised at his own answer. “That would be pleasant, if you’re quite sure.”

“Of course,” Lysander said easily. “It’s not far. Come on.”

It took less than ten minutes to walk there, and as they approached MacGill’s modest exterior, Lysander glanced to Freeman to gauge his reaction. MacGill’s wasn’t like White’s or Brooks’s—it was primarily a sportsman’s club and quite lacking in any splendour. Most of the members

were keen horsemen, and many boxed or fenced, like Lysander. When he entered the clubroom with Adam in tow, he felt obliged to warn him what that meant.

"I hope you're not expecting a stimulating discussion about politics," he murmured. "The fellows here—well, they don't talk about much beyond horseflesh and prize fights, I'm afraid."

"I don't mind that in the least," Freeman said. "To be honest, I'd be happy to just sit and have some half-decent burgundy and an early dinner. I'm famished."

"Very well," Lysander said, smiling. "We'll go straight to the dining room."

It was early yet, and the dining room was quiet. Lysander led Freeman to a table in the corner.

They made easy, if cautious, conversation while they waited for the footman to bring their wine, Lysander telling Freeman about MacGill's and some of its members, and Freeman offering his first impressions of the place. When the footman returned, he went through the usual ceremony of pouring the wine while reciting the various dishes the chef was offering that evening. They both ordered roast beef—Lysander purely because it was the easiest to remember. He was having difficulty concentrating on what the footman was saying when, in front of him, Freeman was lifting his glass to taste the wine, tipping back his chin to briefly expose the strong, pale column of his throat.

Lysander swallowed and thought again of the man's unruly erection and what it might've meant.

It would be foolish—unforgivably *stupid*, in fact—to mention it. Lysander had a better sense of self-preservation than that. He'd always been prudent about such things—so much so that, at three-and-twenty, he was almost wholly inexperienced. Yet today, he was tempted. He searched his mind for a way to raise the subject without giving offence, and found none.

"Do you still intend to come to the ball?" he asked instead. "I realise this afternoon wasn't awfully pleasant . . ."

Freeman sighed. "I promised Simon I'd attend everything you asked me to, at least for one day. And I do not give promises lightly."

"I'll let you off if you like," Lysander replied, "But I'd appreciate the company in truth. I promised Melisande Prentice I'd be there. And at least there will be dancing."

"Dancing?"

Lysander laughed at Adam's panicked expression. "Well, of course. It's a ball."

"I'm afraid I do not dance."

"You don't *dance*?"

“No, I can’t.”

“You can’t? Not even a *quadrille*?”

A slight flush crept over Freeman’s face. “I’m afraid not. I never learned.”

“But *how*? How can you have learned to fence and not dance?” In a way, they were similar accomplishments. Genteel skills that set one apart from the common horde.

“My father had some singular ideas. He saw purpose in fencing—a man can defend himself with a blade after all—but none in dancing.”

Lysander frowned in puzzlement. “Why should the purpose of the thing matter?”

“My father was a man of strong principles. He described himself as a practical utilitarian. Philosophically, he was a follower of Mr. Bentham—he believed the right way forward in any situation is the one that benefits the most people.”

“That not the sort of view I’d expect a man like your father to hold,” Lysander replied. “It sounds rather radical—wasn’t your father, well, awfully wealthy?” Too late he realised how rude that comment was, and his cheeks flushed with heat. “I’m sorry, that was—”

“Don’t apologise. My father was a blunt man and he’d’ve appreciated your directness.” Freeman smiled. “To answer your question, in a different life I think he may well have been a radical. He was a man of strong principles, but he was pragmatic too. His beginnings were humble, and his first priority was to make a success of himself, which he did. And he was able to do a great deal of good with his wealth, in his later years.”

“How did he make a success of himself?” Lysander asked, his curiosity sparked by the expression on Freeman’s face, the affectionate smile and the slight wistfulness there.

“Well, he was apprenticed to a blacksmith at fourteen, and then he became a journeyman mechanic in a mill, maintaining and installing machines. He was fascinated by machines and began to work on his own inventions.” Adam gave another of those wistful smiles. “Right to the end of his life, he was happiest tinkering in his workshop. And his fascination served him well—at twenty-four he invented a particular sort of valve that improved the workings of the engines on a variety of the machines at the mill. He obtained a patent for it and began to make good money. More inventions followed, and a few years later he started his own engineering firm. Then he set up a machine works, making precision parts. It was only much later that he bought his first mill.”

“I had no idea about any of that,” Lysander admitted.

“I’m not surprised,” Freeman said. “He was always spoken of as a ‘

mill-owner' but the truth is, he only bought the first mill to save it—it was the one he'd worked in when he was a young man. When he heard it was to close, he decided to buy it. Once he became involved in the industry, though, he became enthused by it—that was how he was."

"So he bought more?"

"A few, and built his own. The last was the one at New Ryesdale. He built the mill and a whole town around it for the workers. Houses for six hundred families—good, clean houses—a church and two schools with day and evening classes, open to all." Freeman met Lysander's gaze. "Other mill owners told him the workers would turn it to ruins in a twelvemonth, that they were not capable of appreciating such luxuries. They were wrong, of course."

Lysander felt a sudden flush of shame. His own father had workers—labourers who toiled in the fields of the home farm. The last time Lysander had been back at the family estate, he'd noticed how dilapidated their cottages were. He'd raised it with the earl repeatedly, but his father had brushed his comments aside, over and over. And yesterday he'd made it plain that it was none of Lysander's business, hadn't he?

"My father put the greatest value on *useful* things," Freeman said. "And he did not consider dancing to be particularly useful." He paused thoughtfully, then added, "He wouldn't have stayed more than five minutes at any of those houses you took me to this afternoon. He'd have disapproved of everyone—me included—and told them so right to their faces." He smiled at Lysander. "And they'd've thought him exceedingly coarse, I'm sure."

"He wouldn't have disapproved of *you*," Lysander said.

"Yes, he would. He'd have thought me a toad-eater."

Lysander let out a bark of laughter. "Oh, you were no toad-eater, Mr. Freeman. The reason they were so vile to you was precisely because of that."

"Well, I'm glad you think so. I certainly felt like one as I listened to opinions that disgusted me and said nothing to oppose them."

"For Simon."

Freeman sighed. "Yes, despite my better judgment." He drank again, then refilled both of their glasses.

The footman arrived with their food then. He set down their plates, piled high with roast beef, and a silver jug of gravy. Side dishes of braised dumplings and celery. A pot of mustard and another of horseradish. Hearty food for manly appetites.

"This looks good," Freeman said, reaching for the horseradish.

They tucked in, both hungry, and for a few minutes, silence reigned. When Lysander finally came up for air—once fully half his plate was gone—he returned to the conversation they'd abandoned. "So, you never learned

to dance.”

Freeman smiled cheerfully. “No, I never did.”

“But Simon did. I’ve seen him dance at balls with Althea.”

“He took it upon himself to learn since he thought—sensibly I suppose—that as an aspiring politician, he needed to be able to conduct himself with ease in Society. For my part, I didn’t see the need—it’s not as though I have any great desire to court a young lady.”

“Why not?”

The question popped out before Lysander had thought about it. But he couldn’t find it in himself to regret it. The shift in expressions on Freeman’s face—alarm, embarrassment and finally an odd sort of defiance—were too fascinating. Taken together with the incident at Monsieur Gris’s . . . well, it presented some interesting possibilities.

Freeman lifted his half-full glass and drained it. He set it down with a decisive click, took a deep breath and said firmly, “I am not looking for a wife, Winterbourne.”

Just that.

A dozen questions teemed in Lysander’s mind. What did Freeman mean? Merely that he was a confirmed bachelor? Or was there something more to his confession? Could it be that Freeman was like Lysander? That he was more interested in his own sex than the fairer variety? Lysander’s heart began to race at the thought, and his mouth grew dry. He thought of Freeman lunging at him with his blade, his muscular body taut and lean, expression concentrated, and . . . Lysander *wanted* him.

The wanting was like hunger, a yearning that went beyond mere desire, toppling over into pure need.

And it was that, finally, that made Lysander speak, that made him put caution to one side and utter the truth, or one truth anyway.

“I am not looking for a wife either.”

CHAPTER 6

Despite his hatred of dancing, and of socialising with peers of the realm, Adam found that he was practically bouncing with anticipation when he left his rented townhouse that evening for Lady Prentice’s ball.

He had parted company with Lysander Winterbourne an hour before, so they could each don their evening clothes, and now he was going to pick up Winterbourne in his carriage.

It had been a long and very strange day. Those afternoon calls had been tortuous, but they’d been worth it for what came after—first being forced to

revise his opinion of Lysander Winterbourne, and then—

“I am not looking for a wife either.”

Was he reading too much into those words? Too much into the odd sincerity in Winterbourne’s frank blue gaze?

The moment had passed. They’d gone back to their dinners, both a little breathless, but it felt to Adam as though something had changed after that cautious, tentative confession. That a fragile trust was growing between them.

He hoped to God he wasn’t imagining it. It was dangerous for a man like him to bare himself to others. But today, there had been moments when he’d met Lysander Winterbourne’s gaze, and it felt like the man had seen right inside him, seen *Adam*. And it had made him feel as though their meeting, this day, tonight, all of it had been meant to be.

Alone in the carriage, Adam shook his head at himself. He was in danger of losing his head over Lysander Winterbourne, and the worst thing was, that admission didn’t frighten him as it should. It made him feel exhilarated and alive, excited for their next meeting.

Ah, God.

It wasn’t a long drive to the Winterbourne townhouse. As soon as the carriage halted, and before Adam’s groom could alight, the door opened and Winterbourne emerged. He must have been waiting, ready.

He tripped down the steps to the street, impossibly handsome in his evening clothes, and grinned at Adam, who was watching from the carriage window.

“Good evening,” he said, eyes dancing with merriment. “I hope you have your dancing slippers on.”

Adam opened the carriage door, waving the hovering groom back to his perch.

“Despite my inability to dance,” he said, “yes, I do. So I look the part, at least.”

Winterbourne climbed in beside him and closed the door before settling himself on the seat beside Adam.

“If I could get you alone for a while, I could teach you a few steps. Enough to stumble through one dance at least.”

It occurred to Adam that if he could get Winterbourne alone for a while, he’d be able to think of far better things to do than dancing.

“I think you should consider me a lost cause,” he said instead, lips twitching. “I am one-and-thirty, far too old to learn now.”

“Nonsense! There are men far older than you who’ve taken dancing lessons, I’m sure.”

“Ah, but not from a youth like yourself, Winterbourne.”

“I am three-and-twenty!” Winterbourne protested. “Hardly a youth.”

Adam chuckled, but privately he thought that Winterbourne was right—he was a man in his very prime. Ripe for the picking, a bright shiny fruit, tempting Adam to reach for him.

If he dared.



When they first arrived at the ball, Lysander had no choice but to dance, firstly with Melisande and then with each member of the group of young ladies that comprised her particular friends. Once he'd performed that duty, and some more gentlemen had arrived to fill up the young ladies' dance cards, he was able to escape further dancing obligations by pleading wretchedness over having abandoned his own guest so unforgivably.

Freeman seemed a little easier than he had during the afternoon calls. He'd fallen in with two older gentlemen, and when Lysander reached his side, they were deep in conversation about an investment that one of them had made into a tin mine in Cornwall. Nevertheless, when Freeman turned his head and saw Lysander, his sherry-brown eyes warmed with something that looked very like pleasure. It gave Lysander a heady feeling, to think that he was the cause of that look.

Shortly after Lysander arrived, the two gentlemen wandered off in search of their wives, one of them promising to write to Freeman with details of some matter they'd discussed earlier.

“Shall we get some punch?” Lysander suggested. “I'm parched.”

Freeman readily agreed, and they skirted the edge of the ballroom floor, careful to avoid the exuberant turns of one youthful set of dancers, until they reached the refreshments table. A footman stood sentry in front of an enormous silver bowl, doling out his bounty into tiny crystal cups. At Lysander's request, he ladled some of the pinkish liquid into two cups and passed them over with an impassive look.

They strolled away, sipping the punch, which was tepid and sweet. Lysander glanced at Adam, who was wrinkling his nose.

“Not to your taste?”

“Not really. I'd rather have something stronger.”

“Well, if you can bear another hour of this, we could respectably make our apologies and go and find you something a little more to your taste.”

“That sounds—intriguing.” Amusement gleamed in Freeman's warm gaze, and the corner of his mouth twitched. Lysander felt a betraying heat stain his cheeks and wasn't sure why he was blushing.

He cleared his throat a little awkwardly. “We could go back to

MacGill's," he said. "They keep a good cellar."

Freeman caught his eye and held it. "So do I."

For a moment, Lysander just stared at him. Was Freeman inviting Lysander to his house? His stomach lurched with mingled nerves and excitement as his mind raced as to how to respond. But already he'd paused too long. Freeman's gaze shifted away.

"I don't mind, though," he said. "It doesn't really matter where we go, so long as I don't have to dance."

Disappointment gripped at Lysander. He was suddenly quite sure he'd missed a fumbling attempt at . . . something. Something he'd regret letting pass him by.

"You don't get away that easily," he said.

Freeman glanced at him, uncertain. "Sorry?"

"Dancing," Lysander explained. "I'm determined you'll dance at least once before we leave. Melly told me there's a waltz soon. Nothing could be easier than a waltz, I assure you."

"If you think I'm about to make a fool of myself on the ballroom floor —,"

"Of course not—I'll teach you first."

"Oh really? And where is this lesson to take place, pray tell?"

"There's a balcony that looks out over the garden," Lysander said. "Lady Prentice has the house locked up tight to ensure none of the young ladies get compromised, but we'll be allowed to go out. Come on."

He took Freeman's punch cup from his unprotesting fingers and strode away, leaving Freeman to follow. Depositing the still-full cups on the refreshment table, he edged his way back around the ballroom to the balcony doors on the other side. An attentive footman stood in front of them, guarding against the possibility of a young lady being enticed outside by an ardent gentleman.

"We're going to take a bit of air," Lysander informed the footman. The servant looked faintly surprised and glanced around uncertainly. No doubt he'd been warned by his mistress that on no account was any young lady to be allowed to slip out—but since there were no young ladies asking, nor any sign of his mistress, eventually he nodded and opened one of the doors, holding it open for the two men to exit before closing it softly behind them.

It was cool outside, and the darkness was soft, the gardens below the balcony nothing more than whispering shadows. There was a little more light on the terrace, though not much. The only illumination came from the lines of candlelight limning the edges of the window drapes. It was precious little, and Lysander found he was glad of it.

He crossed the terrace and leaned over the stone balustrade, waiting for

his eyes to adjust to the darkness. It was a cloudy night, with no sign of the moon or any stars. No one in the gardens below them. He turned and examined the windows—the last thing Freeman needed was someone spying him receiving a dance lesson. The drapes were heavy and undisturbed. In any event, it was so dark out here he doubted anyone in the ballroom could make anything out even if they did peek out.

As Lysander's eyes became more used to the lack of light, he was able to see that, although the terrace wasn't huge, it was long enough and wide enough for a few basic turns. Good.

Freeman joined him at the balustrade. Their sleeves brushed companionably. Lysander could sense the heat and vitality in Freeman's body, and it made him want to move closer.

Desire threatened to break him open—just from this simple, innocent contact. And all he could think was, *Was it worth it?* Dared he take a risk? Dared he spill his secrets on the balcony floor?

"It's nice out here," Freeman said.

His voice had a deep, rich tone, and Lysander suspected he would be a good singer. A baritone, probably. He found himself wondering how that voice would sound groaning with pleasure, and had to shift to ease the sudden constriction in his breeches.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, it's peaceful," he agreed. "I much prefer it to the ballroom."

"Why do you say that?"

Lysander felt rather than saw the other man look at him. He kept his own eyes on the shadowy gardens below them.

"It reminds me of the country."

"You prefer the country, then?"

"Infinitely. I was supposed to go back to Winterbourne Abbey today, only—" He broke off awkwardly, realising what he'd been just about to say.

Freeman was quiet for a moment, then he said, "Only you had to stay and show me around, is that it?"

"It's been no hardship," Lysander said truthfully. "I've enjoyed today a great deal."

"But you were hoping to leave Town?" Freeman didn't sound annoyed, only curious.

"Yes," Lysander sighed. "If I had my way, I would live in the country. Ideally, I'd manage the Winterbourne estate. But my father—" He broke off, feeling suddenly and intensely sad. Only now did the finality of his father's words from the day before hit him.

"Your brother is the heir. He will deal with the estate as he sees fit. Your path in life will be different."

He would never have his dream. Another dream, perhaps, but not that one.

"I recently acquired an estate," Freeman said, distracting him. "Edgeley Park. It was an impulsive purchase. I am not quite sure what I am going to do with it."

Lysander turned his head. "Where is it?"

"Not far from Town actually. Buckinghamshire. A very pretty little corner of the world. Not that I've spent much time there yet."

"What made you buy it?"

Freeman smiled at him. "I'm not entirely sure. Perhaps—" He broke off, laughing a little to himself.

"What?"

"It will sound whimsical, but—it had been so neglected. I rode round the estate with the agent, and everything was so dilapidated. Every wall was crumbling, every gate broken. The roofs on the buildings were falling in, for God's sake. I felt as though it . . . needed me." He laughed again, a little self-consciously. "Those structural things—the walls and buildings—are being put into order now, but I'm at a loss as to what to do with the land. I need to learn about farming."

"I envy you," Lysander said. "I can't imagine anything more rewarding than putting an estate to rights."

Freeman looked right at him then, his eyes searching Lysander's face. He was so close that Lysander felt the warm gust of his breath, and somehow he knew that Freeman was seeing all his longing, all his secret pain. The things that no one else suspected when they looked at perfect, golden Lysander Winterbourne. A man who seemed to have everything.

The sudden sound of the small eight-piece orchestra launching loudly into a new, and quite fast, piece of music made them both jump, then laugh at their shared reaction. It broke the odd spell between them, though something warm and intimate remained. They were, perhaps, a step closer to one another in their own singular dance.

"That's a waltz," Lysander observed.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, it's the easiest of all to recognise from the music," Lysander replied. "Listen. *One*, two, three—*one*, two, three—*one*, two, three—*one*, two, three—" He tapped the rhythm out against stone balustrade.

He took a step back and opened his arms.

"Come on," he said, adding daringly, "I'll be the woman, if you like."

He was accustomed enough to the darkness now that he saw Freeman's lips twitch at that remark, and his own mouth curved a little in response.

"Now there's an offer that's too good to pass up," Freeman replied. He

stepped forward, halting just in front of Lysander. "What do I do?"

"Stand straight, that's right, head up. Now, take my hand." Lysander twitched his right hand imperiously, and Freeman stepped a little closer and obediently took hold of it, his warm fingers enclosing Lysander's. "Good. Now I place my other hand on your shoulder—"

"And what do I do with my other hand?"

Lysander tutted impatiently. "Surely you've at least *seen* someone waltz?"

"I can't say I've ever paid much attention before."

"Well, you put your hand on my waist—"

Freeman's hand landed on the small of Lysander's back, firm and warm, scant inches above his arse.

"Too low," Lysander managed, though his voice was somewhat strangled. He grabbed Freeman's hand and moved it up till it rested in the middle of his back. "Here."

"Now what?"

That deep, rich voice again, only this time, it gusted close to Lysander's ear, making him shiver and hunch one pleasure-pricked shoulder.

"Now we dance," he said. "The gentleman's supposed to lead, of course, but you'll have to follow me for now. You'll be confused to start with, but then you'll see it's just the same few steps over and over. So—*one*, two, three—*one*, two, three—*off-we-go*—"

The first few minutes were an utter shambles. Freeman couldn't seem to predict which way Lysander was going to step at all, and soon they were tripping over each other's feet and laughing uncontrollably. After a short while, though, Freeman began to pick the simple pattern up.

"Yes!" Lysander exclaimed as they swept round in a neat circle, and Freeman unerringly set off in the right direction with the correct foot. "That's it! You've got it! Keep going!"

He did, and they swirled round the terrace a few more times until, soon enough, Freeman wasn't making any mistakes at all.

"Well done, you've got it," Lysander said as the music came to a stop. He began to pull away, but Freeman resisted, drawing him even closer than before. So close that their thighs pressed together and Lysander's mouth went dry.

He met Freeman's gaze, and what he saw near stopped his heart. Freeman looked at him with desire and heat and honest admiration. He exposed himself fully with that look, making himself naked and vulnerable.

Perhaps Lysander's expression was a mirror of Freeman's, because the man's lips curved as his gaze flitted over Lysander's face. And then he said the impossible.

“I want to kiss you.”

Those words turned Lysander’s world on its head. Or perhaps it was just that, finally, the world had been righted, so that the impossible became possible, if only in this moment.

“Then do it,” Lysander whispered, and the mingled relief and excitement in Freeman’s gaze made his heart clench, hard.

Lysander was not particularly experienced with kissing—or anything else, truth be told—but Freeman’s lips were warm and mobile, persuasive and delicious, and when he teased at the seam of Lysander’s mouth with the tip of his tongue, Lysander felt ready to come in his breeches. Instead, he opened his mouth, welcoming the surprising intrusion of Freeman’s tongue, helpless to stop the soft groan that escaped him as the slick muscle entwined with his own.

Adam Freeman was kissing him.

Adam Freeman was kissing him, and his big, square hands were cupping Lysander’s face, his touch as gentle as any more conventional lover’s. They were kissing and—

The door to the terrace rattled.

They sprang apart, staring at one another for a brief, shocked instant before turning to lean over the balustrade again. Just two friends enjoying the cool evening air.

They greeted the group of middle-aged gentlemen who strolled out to join them a moment later, lingering to converse politely for a few minutes before they returned to the ballroom.

The chandeliers blazed with candles, banishing the soft, forgiving night, restoring normality. That kiss on the balcony might never have happened. Lysander was once again an ordinary gentleman at a ball. Here to dance with lovely young ladies and drink weak, tepid punch. The world was back on its usual axis.

Except that Adam leaned in and whispered, “How soon can we leave?”

And Lysander replied, breathlessly, “When the supper dance starts. No one will notice if we leave quietly.”

It was, as Lysander had anticipated, an easy time to escape. Their hosts were at their busiest, and the rest of the guests were either thronging the ballroom floor or going to the refreshment room early. They slipped away, collecting their coats and hats on the way out.

Once they were outside, standing on the street, Freeman looked at Lysander. “What now, then? Your club?”

Lysander shook his head, swallowing hard against the nervous lump in his throat. “How about your house? I’m told the wine cellar rivals MacGill’s
...”

CHAPTER 7

Freeman's house was very grand. Larger by far than the Winterbourne townhouse. Simon had rented it for him, for the whole season.

Freeman dismissed the footman who'd opened the door to them, telling the man to take himself off to bed. Then he led Lysander upstairs to his private apartments.

"I spend most all my time up here," he said. "The house is far too large for one man. I don't know what Simon was thinking of."

"Don't you?" Lysander prompted, his tone dry.

"I suppose I do," Freeman sighed. "It's an illustrious address. In truth, I'd've been as happy in a hotel." He glanced at Lysander over his shoulder. "Though I must say I'm glad of the privacy this evening."

When they reached the top of the second flight of stairs, Freeman turned off onto a narrow corridor.

"Here we are," he said, opening a door and holding it open for Lysander to precede him.

Lysander walked into a comfortable gentleman's sitting room. A few leather armchairs were grouped about a low table. On the table, on a silver tray, a crystal decanter of wine gleamed in the candlelight like a great ruby.

Lysander stepped into the middle of the room and turned.

"This is nice."

Freeman looked around as though that hadn't occurred to him before now. Then he glanced at Lysander again and smiled. "Would you like some wine?"

Not really.

"Yes. Thank you."

He watched as Freeman poured the wine, accepting the glass he offered with murmured thanks. He took an obligatory sip and stood there, in the middle of the room, unsure how to move things forward now.

He decided to be frank.

"May I ask you something?"

Freeman smiled. "Of course."

"Have you done this before?"

Freeman studied him for several moments. "I have, yes," he said. "Many times. Have you?"

Lysander's face flushed so hard he was sure he must be scarlet. God, he was stupid! Why had he blurted out such a thing? Freeman was experienced, while he was near enough a virgin. This was humiliating.

Freeman saw his embarrassment. His expression softened with something—sympathy—that Lysander found unbearable, and he looked away, his pride smarting.

“Winterbourne—” Freeman said, then stepped closer, adding with gentle emphasis, “*Lysander*—”

Much as Lysander liked the sound of his given name in Freeman’s—*Adam*’s—mouth, he couldn’t bring himself to look at the man as he answered his question. Staring at his feet, he forced himself to admit his lack of experience.

“I sucked a man off once. And there was a boy at school. We used to”—he mimed the familiar jerking motion with his hand—“together, I mean. That’s it. Oh, and I tupp’d a woman once. To try it.”

“*Lysander*, look at me.”

Burning with shame and longing, he did as he was bid, and there it was again. That look. That passionate, intense look that made Lysander feel like parched earth getting rain after a long drought.

“You could not please me more,” Adam said softly. “I count it a privilege to be chosen by you for this. To be allowed to give you this pleasure.” He smiled. “And it will be a pleasure, *Lysander*, of that you can be sure.”

He plucked Lysander’s glass from his hand and set it aside, then he reached for the buttons of Lysander’s coat.

“Let’s have this off.”



Adam took his time undressing Lysander, removing this final layer between them.

He was a beautifully made young man. Straight, strong limbs and long, lean muscles. That frankly handsome face became truly devastating when he smiled his incomparable smile, and Adam loved the lock of golden hair that flopped endearingly over his forehead.

Naked, there were even more things to enjoy—his smooth chest and small, tight nipples, his pale, muscled arse, and the slender curve of his mouthwatering cock. More innocent things too. The high arches of his well-made feet. The sweet dip at the small of his back. The tender nape of his neck, so recently hidden by the mathematical precision of his cravat.

Adam wanted to worship all of him.

He removed his own clothes more quickly, ripping them off and tossing them aside, enjoying the frank appreciation in Lysander’s gaze even as he smiled at his own vanity.

At last they were both naked, and he took Lysander in his arms, pressing their bodies together, head to toe.

Lysander gasped. He opened his eyes wide. "Jesus. I've never—I feel like I'm going to spill now—"

Adam just smiled and dipped his head, touching their lips together in the lightest of kisses, inhaling the scent of the man—wine and pomade and the clean, good fragrance of his skin.

Lysander kissed him back, tentatively at first, touching the tip of his tongue to Adam's mouth, then groaning when Adam parted his lips to allow him full entry. Growing bolder, he thrust his tongue into Adam's mouth, and Adam met it with his own. It was a surrender and a rout, both. Push and pull and give and take. The most pleasurable of tussles. Parry, thrust and riposte.

Adam raised his hands to gently cup Lysander's face as he explored the man's mouth. He stroked the tender tissues of Lysander's soft palate with his tongue, then drew back to feast again on his lips, his kisses now shallow, now deep, his fingertips drifting through the blunt ends of Lysander's golden hair, messing it up thoroughly.

Canting his hips, he ground his cock against Lysander's as best he could with his hands otherwise engaged. He desperately needed more contact, a harder press. The glancing strokes they were managing now were maddening him, and at last he dropped his hands to Lysander's hips, pulling him in hard and driving their pricks together.

Lysander grunted and copied him, taking hold of Adam in the same way, his strong hands drifting further down to grip and knead at Adam's arse.

Oh Christ, but this was going to be quick, far too quick, if Adam wasn't careful.

He pulled back and grabbed Lysander's hand. "Come on," he said, and his voice was hoarse with lust and need. "Come to bed."

He towed Lysander to the other side of the room—to the door that led to the master bedchamber—and drew him inside.

Urging Lysander towards the bed, he murmured, "Lie down. I want to feast on you."

Lysander settled himself on his back, his eyes wide as he watched Adam crawl over him and press kisses to his thighs, hips and belly, circling in tighter and tighter till at last there was nothing left to do but slide his mouth down over Lysander's beautiful cock.

At the first hot pull of his mouth, Lysander cried out, raising his fist to his mouth to muffle his groans as Adam worshipped him with licks and suckles and deep diving pulls. He teased him to the brink only to draw back, gripping Lysander's buttocks firmly to stop him spilling, then going back in

to kiss away the offence. He moved lower, tracing the tender skin between Lysander's balls and his hole with teasing licks that made the man shudder and grunt. And then he went deeper still, pressing Lysander's thighs apart with strong, determined hands, touching the very tip of his agile tongue to the impossibly tight entrance to Lysander's body.

Lysander bucked against his hands. "Jesus, Adam—you can't—"

Adam raised his head. Lysander had levered himself up onto his elbows, and his expression was a bewitching mix of shock and lust.

For a moment, Adam stared at him, arrested by the captivating sight of all that debauched innocence.

"It's all right," he murmured. "You'll like it. Let me."

Lysander stared at for him a long moment, then he groaned and thudded back down to lie flat on the mattress, draping his arm over his face in helpless consent.

Adam smiled and bent his head again, this time licking Lysander's twitching hole, then anointing the tender skin all around with kisses till Lysander was panting and reaching for his own cock, groaning with what sounded like real pain when Adam batted his hand away and took his ballocks in another firm grip.

"Do you want to come?" he asked lightly.

"Yes—oh, God, Adam, yes, please. It'll take nothing at all." He was babbling, his blue eyes wide and pleading and God, Adam loved seeing him like this. That perfect, buttoned-up English gentleman from this morning, clothes gone, all dignity gone, begging for release.

"The truth is, I'd like to fuck you," Adam said quietly. "But only if you want it too. If you don't, we can finish this another way."

"Oh but I do. I do, I do, I do! Adam, *please*—" Lysander canted his hips up, his cheekbones stained with the flush of sex, eyes dark with lust and begging.

Adam leaned to the side of the bed, fetching the oil bottle out of a drawer and removing the stopper. Pouring a generous pool into his palm before setting it aside again. Heedless of the linens, he rubbed the dripping oil into Lysander's opening, pushing into the man's tight channel with his fingers, gently stretching the muscle, watching in awe as his young lover groaned, accommodating him.

Christ, but he was an eager boy.

Adam used the rest of the oil on his own neglected cock, briefly enjoying his own practiced touch before leaning forward and pushing Lysander's legs back, exposing him shamelessly. He took a moment to enjoy that abandoned sight, then helplessly pressed forward, piercing Lysander's hole with the thick head of his cock.

Lysander let out a growling sort of a yelp, a fascinating sound of mingled pain and pleasure that made Adam stop moving. He searched Lysander's face for a clue to his thoughts, his body shaking with the effort of holding back when all he wanted to do was fuck like an animal.

"Do you want me to stop?" he whispered.

"Christ, no!" Lysander grabbed at his hips with desperate hands. "Fuck me, Adam. I'm so very close—"

Adam drove into Lysander's body then, snarling with approval and lust. He'd only thrust a few times before Lysander was reaching his crisis. And God, but the boy was incoherent with pleasure, a babble of senseless words and more primitive sounds falling from his lips as his seed finally erupted from his ruddy shaft. The first surge of his spend went high, hitting his shoulder, making them both gasp out with laughter.

The rest of Lysander's come pulsed out over his belly, and just the sight of it, that unmistakable evidence of his delight, was enough to send Adam flying too. He thrust hard, once, twice more, and then his vision was greying, pleasure suffusing every part of him as he spilled himself inside his lover.

His lover.

This man lying under him, stripped and exposed, just like Adam himself. The two of them, each unveiled to the other, right down to their very skins.

And Adam knew, right then, that he'd been wrong earlier, when he'd told Lysander he'd done this many times. Those other times had been something else entirely.

With Lysander, everything was new.



Afterwards, Lysander felt like he couldn't move. He watched as Adam rose and went to his dressing table, pouring water from the ewer into the bowl to wash himself. Watched as he returned to Lysander with a damp cloth to do the same for him, wiping the oil and semen from Lysander's body with tender swipes.

What happened now? Was Lysander expected to dress and leave?

He was about to ask when Adam slid back into bed beside him and drew the bedcovers over them both, rendering the question redundant, for now at least.

Lysander shifted and turned so that he was facing Adam. He yawned, a great jaw-cracking yawn that made Adam smile.

"Tired?" he murmured.

"Yes."

“Sleep, then. You’re welcome to stay the night. I can assure you no one will disturb us.”

He spoke with the certainty of a rich man with well-trained servants.

“Thank you,” Lysander said, adding after a pause, “Strange, isn’t it, to think we were only introduced today? When I woke up this morning, I was not looking forward to the day ahead, but it has turned out . . . very well.”

“Yes, it has.” Adam smiled. “And what of tomorrow? What do you have planned for me? More afternoon calls? Driving in Hyde Park? Perhaps a rout or a musicale in the evening?”

His words were light, but Lysander heard the faint tension in them. The vaguest hint of dread.

“What would *you* like to do?” he asked.

For several long moments, Adam considered the question, then he said, “I would like to take you to Edgeley Park. I would like to hear what you have to say about it—what you think I should do with it.” He paused, then added, “We could go, too. We could pack our valises and be off. The wedding’s not for weeks. What do you say?”

Lysander found that his throat was suddenly aching. It was as though Adam had opened the door of his gilded cage and invited him to hop out. And as wonderful and exciting as that was, it was terrifying too.

The incipient excitement in Adam’s gaze dimmed a little. “You don’t have to—” he began.

It was that that decided him.

Before Adam could say another word, Lysander grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him into a swift, fierce kiss, releasing him just as quickly.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I’ll come with you.”

And just like that, Adam’s smile was back, and his sherry-brown gaze was warm and affectionate, and a little wondering too.

“Would tomorrow be too soon?” he asked.

“No,” Lysander said. “Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.”



About Joanna Chambers

Joanna Chambers always wanted to write. She spent over 20 years staring at blank sheets of paper and despairing of ever writing a single word. In between staring at blank sheets of paper, she studied law, met her husband and had two children. Whilst nursing her first child, she rediscovered her love of romance and found her muse. Joanna lives in Scotland with her family and finds time to write by eschewing sleep and popular culture.

Contact

Website: joannachambers.com

Twitter: twitter.com/chambersjoanna



THE RUIN OF
GABRIEL ASHLEIGH

by
KJ Charles

On the morning of his destruction, Lord Gabriel Ashleigh woke up with Satan's own head.

He lay in bed, eyes shut, as he swam dizzily into consciousness, trying to control his rebellious stomach. It roiled with nausea from the wine, the brandy, the gin, and then, as waking crept over him, from the terrible, cold-sweat realisation of what he had done last night.

Surely he hadn't . . . It was a dream. It had to be a dream. Please let it be a dream.

It wasn't a dream. Vomit rose in his throat.

What have I done, what have I done?

He was ruined. It was as simple as that. He had wagered everything at the gaming tables and lost it all, and left himself only a choice between fleeing to the Continent or ending it here, now, in a room alone with a pistol.

The devil fly away with that. Ash was ashamed, and angry, and despairing, but he was also just twenty-six years old. He didn't, despite the throbbing pain that speared his eyeballs, want to die.

No, he would leave the country. Take passage to France, find a place among the other men that England had broken, live with disgrace. It would still be better than the alternative.

But to have ruined himself in a single night. To shame his sisters . . . Eleanor's engagement was due to be announced. If he made a bolt for it, what would that do to her? Her intended was the Duke of Buckstead's eldest son, and that family was as high in the instep as his own. Surely the Ashleigh blood would count for more than the peccadilloes of one black sheep?

He could go to his father, he supposed, but the thought was chilling. The Duke of Warminster was not a kindly man. His limited affections were mostly reserved for his heir, Lord Maltravers, with very little for the other children, and none at all for Ash, who he openly despised. It was the Duke's will that his unsatisfactory youngest son should join the army and remove himself from the family, and without Great-Aunt Lucinda's legacy to make him independent, Ash would have had no choice but to obey.

The legacy he had gambled away last night. His home, his comfortable life, his independence from his father. Everything staked on the turn of a card, and lost.

His father would probably buy him a commission, if only to prevent an Ashleigh joining up as a private, but Ash knew he could expect nothing more helpful from that quarter, and, God help him, he didn't want to join the army. No soldier, he: Ash was a wastrel, a rattle, and a damned fool to boot.

He attempted to sit up. That was a mistake. It took a moment of carefully shallow breathing to control his stomach as his brain bumped gently against the inside of his skull. He slackened his muscles again, lying back on the bed, trying to grapple with his predicament.

Might Mal intervene on his behalf? Was that a chance? Unlike their father, Mal was a drinking man who enjoyed the tables. He would understand how Ash had come to this pass. But he would not understand, would never understand, why his brother had chosen to play with Francis Webster.

Maybe he could be made to see it as an act of loyalty instead of defiance. Ash rehearsed the arguments: *The fellow was insolent. I could not let him win. I staked everything rather than accept defeat.*

I lost anyway. That was the sticking point. Mal disliked being on the losing side.

Still, it was worth a try, although at best he would be sent back to Warminster Hall, deep in the country, for months or years under his father's joyless eye. Death might be preferable.



Any hopes Ash had harboured of Mal's support wisped away like smoke when his brother thundered up the stairs at the ungodly hour of noon.

"God *damn* you, Gabriel!" Mal's voice was never pleasant, but to a man with a head like Ash's it was downright grating. "You gull, you sapskull, you addle-pated fool. I hope you don't expect me to help you. You brought this on yourself, mixing with that wretch Webster . . ."

Ash shut his eyes. He had managed to get out of bed, and to consume some of a plate of ham and eggs, but he was still in his dressing gown. It was silk damask, most gorgeously embroidered, and had given him great pleasure at its purchase—pleasure that now withered under his brother's contemptuous gaze.

Contemptuous gazes seemed to be Ash's lot in life, he reflected, as Mal bellowed on. That was what he remembered about last night. Well, no: he remembered the clouds of smoke, the brandy glass by his elbow, constantly refilled. He remembered, as though it had happened to someone else, the strange fervour that had gripped him to wager and wager again, disregarding Freddy's urgent representations, and the dizzying panic, once he realised what he had done, that had led to him consuming much of a bottle of Stark Naked. But most of all, he remembered the steady, scornful regard of a pair of hazel-green eyes opposite him, their gaze spurring him on to defy the cards and Fate itself rather than walk away, and that was a memory that

made him sweat as much as the gin that oozed its way from his skin.

“Spider Webster!” Mal shouted, seemingly realising that he’d lost Ash’s attention. “Spinning Jenny! That scoundrel! And you lost Chamford House to him! Our family’s property!”

That was Mal’s true objection, Ash reflected, observing his brother’s bulging eyes. He had been furious not to be named Great-Aunt Lucinda’s heir, although he had paid the slightest possible lip service to that embarrassing relic of bygone days. Aunt Lucie had still sported the ludicrous fashions and blunt manners of her youth well into her eighties, and had lavished on Ash all the affection the rest of his family never showed, or felt. Ash had loved the outrageous old woman dearly. He missed her now.

But Mal was the eldest; everything came to him by right. Despite having a very neat property of his own, and the Warminster estate awaiting him when their father turned up his toes, he had wanted Chamford House too. And he would not wish it to be owned by Francis Webster.

Mal went away eventually, after advising Ash that he could go to the devil, recommending that he take himself there forthwith, and assuring him that their father would feel the same. It was no more than Ash had expected, really.

He was staring out of the window, wondering what to do, when the note came.



Ash looked again at the paper in his hand. *Mr. Francis Webster begs to request Lord Gabriel Ashleigh’s company at nine o’clock.*

It wanted a few moments to nine now, and here he was, outside Webster’s home, a town house on Bourdon Street. Elegant, well located, but off the main thoroughfare of Grosvenor Street. Just a little set back, a little reserved.

Ash had made himself respectable, sweating out the gin at Cribb’s and in a Turkish bath. He wouldn’t want Webster to believe he was always bosky. In truth he had kept his potations within reasonable limits over the last couple of years, in the hope of shedding his unwanted reputation as one who dipped too deep.

Except for last night of course. Although it hadn’t been the brandy that had made him behave so brattishly. It had been that enraging cold stare.

It was absurd, how he’d reacted. Webster *was* cold, everyone knew that. Unfriendly to his intimates, icy to strangers, never standing up at balls. A chilly, bloodless, callous fellow, who had Ash’s ruin in the palm of his hand.

Ruin, or salvation, perhaps. If he chose to give Ash time, there might be

a way to salvage the wreck. Though Ash couldn't imagine why he would. He was Lord Maltravers' brother, and Webster would not have any kindness for him at all.



It had started at Eton, when Webster and Mal had been put in the same house.

The young Lord Maltravers was scion of the ancient Ashleigh family, heir to the venerable Warminster dukedom, one of the better-born men in England, and certainly one of the most puffed-up about it. Always conscious of his own superiority, Mal had felt instant contempt for his fellow pupil Webster, a gangling, bookish youth, and the contempt had sharpened into profound dislike when he'd learned that the fellow was the worst sort of commoner. Francis Webster, attending a school for the sons of gentlemen, thrust into Lord Maltravers' company every day, was nothing more than the son of trade, his father's wealth coming from some weaver in the Midlands who'd invented a new kind of loom. Mal had been enraged and offended at his forced association with such a fellow and had not missed any opportunity to make him learn his place.

They'd dubbed him "Spinning Jenny," of course. Mal had told his younger siblings that, frequently, and they'd laughed every time. Spinning Jenny, Web Spinner, Spider Webs, Money Spider, and a hundred other variations besides. The insults had been relentless; the ostracism general; and the kicks and punches would have hurt.

Ash had not been involved at school. He was six years younger than Mal and Webster, and the affairs of older boys were not his business. Of course he'd been on Mal's side, because Mal was his brother and Webster was a dashed commoner, but in truth he'd felt sorry for the fellow. For all Mal's pride, he had cursed little idea of fair play or gentlemanly behaviour. Ash had felt his fist and boot, and earned the rough side of his tongue, quite often enough to be grateful that someone else was Mal's target instead of himself.

No: there was no great reason that Webster should feel affectionate towards an Ashleigh.



The chime of nine began, resounding from nearby clocks and churches. Ash swallowed hard against the nervous constriction in his throat. He had dressed well, in the hope it would give him confidence, and because Webster was noted for his style: the plainest possible, but cut to perfection. The

natural curl to Ash's dark blond hair meant that he could achieve the Brutus fashion of dishevelled waves without resorting to bear-grease. His coat, made by Mr. Cheney, was a masterpiece of tailoring; his linen was spotless, his cravat tied in an unassuming neat Mathematical, and his superfine breeches, nicely judged for an informal evening, so tight as to make the best of what he knew, modesty apart, to be excellent legs.

He might be facing ruin, disgrace, his family's fury, or worse, but whatever Webster might mean to do with him, Ash intended to appear a gentleman, and take whatever he doled out as a gentleman should.

He knocked at the door. An impassive footman led him into a generously sized room, something between a dining room and a drawing room. There was a mahogany dining table, the bare wood gleaming, sized for no more than eight; a card table with two chairs, a couch. Wax candles blazed in two candelabra, lighting the card table but little else. There were rugs on the floor, of vaguely Oriental look to Ash's uninformed eye, and, oddly, more rugs, or at least some sort of cloth, hanging on the wall in place of pictures. The one opposite was woven stuff of some kind, with a pattern that he didn't trouble to make out because Francis Webster's elongated, spindly shadow stretched across it, blackening the brightness.

Webster stood in the middle of the room, behind the card table. Impeccable Hessians, gleaming black. Buckskin breeches on those long legs. Coat of superb cut, flattering his tall, lean build. Mathematical tie, just as Ash sported but, in truth, rather better arranged. Straight mid-brown hair brushed back in that severe style that accentuated the narrowness of the man's face. Hazel eyes, unblinking, on Ash.

"Good evening," Ash managed, as the door shut behind him.

"Good evening, Lord Gabriel." Webster's voice was cool. He didn't invite Ash to sit.

"You, ah, you requested my company."

Webster's eyes were on him, assessing. Ash tried not to shift nervously. He wasn't sure what there was in the way Webster was looking at him, but he didn't like it.

"Mmm." Webster moved to the dining table and took up a little pile of papers. "You played rather deep last night."

"Yes."

"You wagered . . ." He riffled through the scrawled notes. "Some thirty thousand pounds, and your property, Chamford House." His voice was without inflection, devoid of concern. He might have betrayed more passion discussing what boot-blackening recipe his valet favoured. "Do you normally wager so extravagantly, Lord Gabriel?"

Webster's cool tone seemed to dwell on that absurd name of his. "My

friends call me Ash.”

“I have no interest in being your friend.”

Ash’s mouth dropped open. If the fellow expected him to swallow that tamely—

“I’m not aware that you possess unlimited resources,” Webster went on, apparently unaware of Ash’s indignation. “You’re at a stand, aren’t you?”

“I’m at point non plus,” Ash said bluntly. A waste of time to prettify it now. “I’ll have to sell out of the Funds to make good. If you will give me time—”

“No. I shan’t give you time. But I shall give you a chance.” Webster moved away, a long step backwards and another round, and pulled out the chair opposite to Ash, on the other side of the card table. “Will you play?”

Ash stared at him. “Are you jesting?”

“Hardly.”

“But—” Why in God’s name would Webster want to play with him again? “I don’t understand.”

“There is nothing to misunderstand. If you wish to regain your property . . .” Webster picked up a pack of cards, split them, riffled the pasteboard through his slim fingers. “You are no better than a flat at piquet. Écarté?”

Ash was, he knew, terrible at piquet, where Webster was notoriously good. How he had believed he could play the man at it last night, he couldn’t imagine. “I do prefer écarté, but I’ve nothing to wager.” Webster raised a brow. Ash felt himself flush. “You can see for yourself.” He indicated the heap of papers. “I’ve not left myself a feather to fly with.”

“Your father is very well fledged,” Webster observed.

“He wouldn’t pay my gambling debts, and I shouldn’t dream of asking him to. It’s my own fault.”

Webster’s hazel eyes narrowed slightly. “Good heavens, Lord Gabriel. I had thought the Warminster upbringing did not include such expressions.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Expressions of responsibility or of regret,” Webster said with chilly precision. “I have not been familiar with those from members of your family.”

And there it was. Sweat sprang under the constricting cloth around Ash’s neck. Of course Webster held a grudge. Why wouldn’t he?



The older boys had left Eton long before Ash, and without Mal’s abrasive presence he found he rather enjoyed the place. Time and the tide of education swept him to Oxford, where he discovered wine, cards, and,

furtively, the pleasures of the flesh. Then he had moved into the ton, a callow young lout of twenty-one, and that was when he'd met Francis Webster again.

It had been in Quex's, a club in St James's, and Ash had been on the mop, of course. He'd been foxed six days out of seven then. Arm round his friend Freddy's shoulders to stay upright, hopelessly disguised, he'd stumbled into the room and come face to face with a man . . .

He was tall, a good four inches above Ash's own medium height, with a narrow, assessing face and hazel-green eyes that locked onto Ash's own with an intensity that forced him to look away. And as he'd dropped his eyes, he'd registered the long limbs.

Webster wasn't spindly any more. The ludicrous lankiness of the adolescent was all gone in the grown man, replaced by a lean, rangy build deliberately accentuated rather than concealed by his extremely well-cut coat. But his long arms had triggered Ash's memory and there, in the middle of one of London's most exclusive gaming hells, face to face with the fellow, he'd blurted out, "By Jove, it's Spinning Jenny!"

And worse. It had got worse. He'd drunkenly tried to reminisce—why, why?—about Mal's various nicknames, insults, as if they were a shared joke. His friends, as foxed as himself, had roared with laughter. Webster had stared him down, expression icing over, until Ash had belatedly realised that nobody else in the room was laughing and finally stumbled to a stop. Webster had waited for the silence, let it grow to an unbearable pitch, spoken only when every man in the place was listening with undisguised interest.

"If I wished to hear the squalling of toothless brats," he had said with cold calm, "I should pay a call on my sister's nursery. I commend it to you for a visit, Lord Gabriel. You would feel quite at home."

And then he had turned on his heel and walked away.



Webster was watching him still, and Ash was sure he was thinking of that night. He shifted uncomfortably.

Mal had made the fellow's life hell at school, and Ash knew damned well he felt no regret, and that even if he did it would go unexpressed. If Mal had ever admitted himself at fault, Ash hadn't heard it any more than he'd heard their father apologise to anyone. He had been raised in the knowledge that the pair of them were infallible, that any disagreement placed him in the wrong.

He didn't much like it, and he didn't suppose Webster did either.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out.

Webster's brows shot up. "I beg your pardon?"

Ash cursed himself. He hadn't intended to say that. For him to apologise, in this situation and years too late, smacked of toad-eating at best. But he had been in the wrong, there was no denying it, and it needed to be said.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "That night in Quex's. The fact is, I was badly foxed, and I had no intention of being so cursed rude, and I apologise. I should have said so long before."

Webster's eyes were fixed on his face, unreadable in the candlelight. His mouth looked a little tense. "I see," he said. "Are you under the impression that I am holding a grudge, Lord Gabriel, or that I can be blandished into giving you an easier ride?"

"I've no idea what you think," Ash retorted. "And I'm well aware you hold the whip hand here. I was in the wrong and I owe you an apology, and you have it. That's all."

Webster's expression didn't change that Ash could see. He was still a moment more, then he said, again, "Will you play?"

"I told you, I've nothing to stake."

"Have you a shilling?"

Ash took a deep breath. But, after all, he had nothing more to lose.

"A shilling. Against which you stake, what, Chamford House?"

"Hardly." Webster seated himself with a flick of coat tails and picked up the pack to deal. "But let us say ten pounds, for now."

It was quite the new thing, *écarté*, a fast-moving game played with a limited pack, much simpler than piquet and more dependent on chance after the initial exchanges of cards that allowed both men to improve their hands. Ash doubted that Webster considered it a serious game, but his face was keen and intent in the candlelight.

"Spades are trumps."

"I propose an exchange."

"How many?"

"Four." Ash discarded four cards, took his replacements, and was rewarded by the king of spades and two knaves. Webster exchanged three.

"I stand pat," Ash said, declining the opportunity for another round of exchanges. If he couldn't win with this hand, he was in trouble. "I declare king of trumps. Play."

He did win, taking four tricks to make two points. Webster seemed indifferent.

Though he played a lot, because everyone did, Ash wasn't one of nature's gamblers, preferring games of pure chance to those involving skill.

He found the tension of piquet rather sickening than exciting, and disliked the silences. He couldn't keep track of what had been played with any great accuracy, certainly not after the first few hands, and had no sense for what cards were likely to come up.

More than that, though, he was distractible. He should have been concentrating on the pasteboard rectangles, but as Webster swept them up to shuffle, he found himself looking at the man's hands instead. Long-fingered, pale, and smooth, with well-kept nails except for the left thumb. That was very short and a little jagged. It looked as though someone had attempted to improve a nail that had broken, or been worried by teeth.

Webster didn't look as though he bit his nails. His expression was calm, even bland. He was not a handsome man by most standards, with his narrow face, thin lips and slanted, saturnine eyebrows. Some people said he looked sly. Ash thought *shrewd* said it better. It was an intelligent face, a formidable one. Ash wondered what it would be like to be the full focus of Francis Webster's undivided attention. The thought made him shift uncomfortably.

Ash dealt, which meant Webster could choose to exchange. "I propose. Two."

The dealer had to accept the first exchange, which was tiresome, because he had an excellent hand. "One."

"I propose two."

"I refuse."

The game went on. Ash won a few points, lost more. Webster's hands moved with a slightly unnerving smoothness on the shuffle. He poured brandy, and Ash drank it and wagered recklessly, without thought. There was no prospect that he could win against a gamester of Webster's skill. He was lost and this was merely delaying the inevitable.

It was all his own fault, of course, like so much else. He'd deserved Webster's enmity, and last night he'd paid the price.



There had been a number of sequels to the incident at Quex's. Ash had discovered that Webster was generally admired, if not liked, for his wealth, his cool reserve, and his skill at the card tables. More than that, he was an intimate of the set headed by Lord Richard Vane, dubbed by some the Ricardians. These were an oddly assorted group of men, of varied birth, wealth, or brain, including some very queer fish indeed, but they shared qualities of self-possession and a strong mutual loyalty that made them bad men to cross, and with Lord Richard, Mr. Julius Norreys and Sir Absalom Lockwood among their number, few felt able to set themselves up in

opposition. The Ricardians set their own fashions and chose their own friends with little care for the world's judgement, and the world made way for them. Mal remarked on them occasionally with disapproval, even resentment, and now Ash learned why. Francis Webster was a Ricardian, but Lord Maltravers, heir to the Duke of Warminster, his name passport to any other society, was not. And nor, of course, was Ash.

He was advised that he was no longer welcome at Quex's. Other hells were closed to him, and some men sheered off, avoiding him when the news spread that he had set himself up in enmity to the Ricardians. Ash couldn't blame them: it was the last thing he'd have chosen to do if he wasn't such a blasted fool. Gallingly, Webster's words had stuck. Ash had been dubbed the Toothless Brat for years, a soubriquet that was only just beginning to wear off.

And he hadn't apologised. He'd wanted to, desperately; he had been bitterly ashamed of himself by the time he woke the next morning—insulting a man to his face for no reason, good God. But the next few times he'd encountered Webster, he'd received only a blank look that left him tongue-tied and squirming inside. So he'd told himself that the miserable fellow had doubtless deserved it, had accepted Mal's clap on the back, and had set himself to confront the man when he could. A challenging stare, a few encounters at the gaming tables from which Webster would invariably take his money and excuse himself early. Ash hadn't wanted to fight—he wasn't a fighting man—but there was something in the way Webster looked at him or, worse, the way he ignored him, that made him grit his teeth. He resented being ignored by Francis Webster.

It had come to a head last night.

It had been at Quex's, again, to which Ash had been readmitted at last. He had stood chatting with a friend in the room—perhaps a little distracting to the players, but damme, it was a social club as well—and Webster had lifted his dark head and given Ash a long look that had made him flush from hair to toes. A hard, assessing, *invasive* sort of a look . . . insolent, that was what it was, Ash had told himself, and for all his faults, for all his shames and peccadilloes and his secret sins, he was the third son of the Duke of Warminster. He would not allow a weaver's spawn to bring him to the blush. No longer able to tolerate the man, he'd drawn himself up to his full, though not magnificent, height, marched over to the table, demanded to play . . .

And lost, and lost, and lost.



"Five points," Webster said, sitting back. He swept the cards off the

table, glanced at the litter of notes to one side, raised a brow.

"I'm out," Ash said. It scarcely mattered. He'd come with nothing, he'd leave with nothing. That had doubtless been Webster's intention; he couldn't imagine what else it was. "I've nothing to wager."

"I'll accept your note of hand."

Ash had no intention of adding to the mountain of his debt. "I couldn't pay. I told you. You've had everything but the coat off my back."

"True." Webster contemplated him. "A hundred pounds against your coat."

"What?"

"It's so often said, *the coat off a man's back*, yet I've never played for such a thing. One should be open to new experience." Webster's thin lips curved. "On the first trick."

Apparently, he meant it. Ash swallowed. "Very well."

He dealt, giving himself a worthless hand. Webster proposed an exchange. Ash accepted, exchanged four cards himself, and found himself with nothing more than knaves. If only Webster would exchange again . . .

"I stand."

Ash held back a curse. He couldn't exchange if Webster didn't, and this was not a promising hand.

And he did not win. Webster took the trick, contemplated the cards, and looked up at Ash. One of them, Ash wasn't sure who, breathed out hard enough to send the candle flame jumping, making shadows flicker over Webster's eyes, darkening their hazel-green.

"Your coat," Webster said softly.

Ash stood, movements a little jerky, feeling the cloth tight around his shoulders. "You'll have to help me."

Webster moved round, behind him. Ash felt breath whisper over the skin of his neck, raising hairs. Webster's hands came onto his shoulders, very softly, closing over the cloth, gently tugging it away from Ash's body, sliding the tight material down his arms. Ash stood, not moving, as he would with his valet, feeling a touch of chill as the warm cloth was removed, leaving him standing in his shirt, with Webster behind him.

Webster's finger brushed Ash's, and he jolted, but the man was merely bringing the sleeves over his hands. Ash calmed his breathing. His heart seemed to be pounding a little too fast.

"Another hand," Webster said softly, dropping the coat over the back of a chair.

"What do you propose to play for now? My shirt?"

"If you choose."

Ash almost laughed. "What do you stake?"

“A thousand.”

Ash’s breath caught, an audible little gasp. He didn’t have a good hand, but it was surely worth the risk. “You must want my shirt very much.”

Webster moved back to his side of the card table. “It’s a fine weave,” he said with dry amusement, but his eyes looked very dark in the candlelight.

“Very well,” Ash said. “On the next trick?”

Webster inclined his head.

He led. Ash lost.

He wasn’t sure what to say. Webster didn’t speak either, simply watching, and Ash realised with incredulity and a terrible anticipation that the man was waiting for him to take it off.

He stood. Loosened his cravat, stripped off his waistcoat. Tugged the shirt-tails free with hands that shook a little. Watched Webster watching him.

He lifted the linen off his shoulders, over his head, knowing that as he did it, as his face caught in the soft cloth, his torso was exposed to Webster’s scrutiny. He pulled the shirt off and stood in the candlelight, bare-chested, waiting.

Webster didn’t make a move to take the shirt from him. He was looking at Ash, and not at his face either. His lips were slightly parted. Ash could hear him breathe. The narrow gaze that lingered on Ash’s waistband was as intimate as a finger drawn along his skin. He was suddenly, painfully conscious of the blond curls that ran down his abdomen, inviting Webster’s gaze to follow them lower.

“What now?” Ash asked, dry-mouthed.

“Another wager. The next trick.”

“What will you stake?”

Webster swept up the sheaf of papers—scrawled promises to pay, banknotes—and shoved the lot into the middle of the table. “Everything.”

“I . . .” The constriction in Ash’s throat was as bad as the constriction from his damnably, impossibly tight breeches. “And what will you have me stake?”

“Yourself.” Webster’s voice rasped, as if he had to force the word out. “You, over the table. Legs spread. Crying my name.”

Ash’s fingers tightened in the shirt, bunching the linen in front of his groin. This was unconscionable. Anyone would call the man out. He would surely expect an angry response . . .

Had Webster heard whispers about him? Could this be a test, a way for Webster to ruin him more thoroughly than money ever could? But no, too dangerous: Ash could accuse him in return, tell people about that outrageous wager, and his word was as good as Webster’s.

And he knew damned well it wasn't a test. There was nothing of pretence in the hungry eyes that watched him. The thought made the blood pulse painfully in his loins.

"A new deal." The words came unbidden. "I'm not betting my house on that hand." Or his arse, either. He didn't say that, but the curve of Webster's lips showed he hadn't had to.

Webster picked up the cards. "Sit, then. And put my shirt down."

Ash hesitated, but it was too late for modesty. He dropped the shirt over the chair to join the coat. Without the concealing linen in front of him, his prick seemed to strain twice as hard at the constricting cloth, thrusting out at his opponent.

Webster fumbled the shuffle. Cards burst from his fingers and hit the tabletop with a soft rattle.

They stared at each other. The blood was pounding in Ash's ears, echoed by the steady throb in his cock.

Webster scraped the cards together, shuffled again without speaking. Ash moved forward, dreamlike, and seated himself with difficulty.

Webster dealt. "Clubs are trumps."

"I propose an exchange. Three cards."

"I accept. Exchange two."

"I propose. Two."

"I accept. One."

"I propose three."

"I refuse."

Ash gripped his cards tightly. His highest card was the king of diamonds, but he had two other diamonds in his hand, including the queen, and had discarded two more. There were just three diamonds left, and no guarantee one was among Webster's five cards. If Webster held a diamond, he would have to follow suit and Ash would have won it all back. If Webster didn't hold a diamond, if he had a void and a trump, then . . .

Ash didn't look at the dining table, the one Webster wanted him bent over. It took an effort of will.

Should he lead the diamond, or the knave of spades? He'd discarded spades too; he couldn't remember how many.

Webster was watching him with those hungry hazel eyes.

He'd push Ash over the table, sprawling, helpless, and take him like that, without mercy, and Ash would cry his name, he knew he would, and he would be ruined, utterly ruined . . .

He played the king of diamonds.

The world stopped turning as Webster looked at the single card on the table.

Then, in a swift movement, the tall man threw his hand down, pushed his chair back, and stood. "Your trick."

"What?"

"Your trick. You win. Congratulations."

"You haven't played," Ash said blankly.

"I don't need to put down a card to see it. Take your damned paper and get out. And your clothes, I don't want them. Out."

Bewildered, Ash stood too. "But—"

"For Christ's sake! You've won, damn it. Or did you want to lose?" That was an open sneer. Webster's face was set in an ugly, contemptuous expression. Ash felt himself flush. He reached out a hand for his shirt.

Then he lunged for Webster's cards.

He took him by surprise, but Webster was fast enough. He snatched the hand up. Ash grabbed his wrist, twisting it across the table, sidestepping round until they were locked together, as if arm-wrestling, glaring into each other's faces.

"What the devil are you doing?"

"Show me your hand."

"What do you mean by that?" Webster's tone was full of icy anger. Ash didn't care.

"If you had a lower diamond, you'd have played it. If you had no trumps to your hand, you'd have accepted my exchange." Ash might not be a master at the card table, but he was absolutely certain of his logic. Webster's face didn't change at all, not a jot, holding that impassive gambler's look. "You won. Didn't you?"

"Are you accusing me of cheating?" The words were bitten out.

"Show me your cards."

"Be damned to you." Webster wrenched at his grip, a sudden movement, but though Ash was the shorter, he had more strength in his arms. He kept tight hold, his bare chest rising and falling, skin just brushing Webster's coat. "Consider your words, sir, or face the consequences."

"You'll call me out for accusing you of generosity?" Ash did his best to raise a sardonic eyebrow. "I tell you what. Give me your word as a gentleman that you lost that trick, and I shall accept it."

Webster gritted his teeth. "I shan't stoop to answering such an absurd allegation."

Ash released him and stepped back. They stared at each other, breathing hard, then Webster swept up the cards from the table in a fluent move, losing the hand into the pack forever. "Take your winnings and go."

Winnings. His home, his life, given back to him, his manhood uncompromised. He could walk away. He was safe.

"One more hand," Ash said.

"Haven't you had enough of gambling? You overestimate your skill. And your luck."

"One more," Ash repeated.

"And what stakes do you propose?"

"On my side?" Ash met his eyes. "As before."

Webster's mouth opened slightly.

"Me. Bent over that table. Crying your name."

Webster's body was quiveringly still, like a retriever poised for game. "And . . . what should I wager against such a stake?"

Ash paused, drawing it out for a deliberate second, then shrugged. "Do you have a shilling?"

Webster lunged. Ash stumbled back a pace, but he was too solidly built to be knocked off balance by a lanky fellow like that, and he took his weight on the back foot. Webster's long hands closed around his skull, driving into his hair, and his mouth came down on Ash's own, hard and fierce. Ash responded with equal savagery, with kisses that were almost bites. Webster's tongue was in his mouth, his skin rasping against Ash's, the taste of brandy on them both.

He pulled Ash closer, body to body, dragging Ash's face upwards to meet the kiss. Ash's nipples rubbed against Webster's linen. *Half naked, shorter, in his house. In his power.* The thought thrilled through his blood, and he ground his rigid erection against Webster's thigh, eliciting a savage gasp.

"Christ." Webster pulled his mouth away, the thin lips filled and reddened. "You." He pushed Ash back, not hard, but Ash went willingly, until his arse was against the edge of the table, and Webster's hands were at his buttons, fumbling, undoing the front fall of his breeches, attempting to push the cloth downwards.

"Damnation. These things are tight."

"Not usually this tight," Ash pointed out. "Oh Jesus." Webster's hand was running over the linen of his drawers, over his swollen cock. "Oh God, please."

"Just—God damn it." Webster slid abruptly to his knees, tugging cloth with him. Ash's erection sprang free, the tip glistening wet already, shining in the candlelight, and Webster leaned forward and took it in his mouth.

Ash made an entirely involuntary high-pitched noise.

Webster didn't seem to notice that he'd squealed like a bashful maiden. His mouth was warm and very tight on Ash's cock, lips gripping firmly, sliding over the head and clamping down on the shaft. Ash groaned, the sound wrung from him, and stared down at the movement of Webster's

head.

Francis Webster, impeccable, poised, dangerous Webster, with his supercilious sneers, on his knees and gamahuching Ash as though he were paying for it.

Ash spread his legs as far as he could and felt Webster sway forward, between his thighs. God alone knew what picture they would make, he in his boots and Webster fully clothed, sucking his cock, and oh God, he was going to spend.

“Stop.” He tugged at Webster’s hair. “Stop.”

Webster looked up, the grip of his lips relaxing but with Ash’s rigid prick resting in his wet, open mouth, and Ash nearly climaxed there and then at the sight. He clenched his fingers on the edge of the tabletop. “My God. Webster.”

“Fuh—” Webster had to pull away from Ash’s prick to speak, letting it bob forlornly. “Francis.”

Crying my name. “Francis,” Ash repeated, as though he’d never heard the sounds before. “I propose an exchange.”

Webster—Francis—moved to stand, and Ash put out a hand, pulling him to his feet. “You’re dressed.”

“And so I’ll stay.” Ash’s gaze flew to his face, feeling a pulse of quick alarm, but Francis wore an odd expression, almost a smile. “To have you naked while I remain clothed is surprisingly . . .” He tailed off, as if thinking of the word, then said softly, “It excites me.”

Christ, that was frank. Ash felt his cheeks redden, but this was scarcely a time to discover modesty. Instead, he hopped backwards, propping his arse on the smooth wood of the tabletop, and lifted a booted foot to Francis. “Then make me naked.”

Francis’ lips parted. He stood quite still for just a second, and Ash would have wondered if he’d insulted the man if his erection hadn’t been tenting his buckskins in a way that made Ash feel relieved to be unclothed. Then he knelt, very deliberately, on his knees before Ash and took hold of one of his Hessians.

“Oh.” Francis’ grip was tight, his fingers firm, his head bowed as if in service as he worked the smooth leather from Ash’s foot. He seemed intent on the task, so Ash used the toe of his other boot to nudge gently between Francis’ legs and heard his stuttering breath.

“Take my boots off,” he repeated, and saw Francis shudder. “And then bend me over this damned table and make good on your wager.”

Francis didn’t reply, simply concentrating on easing the boot off. He ran his hand over Ash’s stockinged foot, meditative, and then leaned forward, kneeling up, to rub his hard swell of cock deliberately against the sensitive

sole while he pleased Ash's prick with his mouth once more.

Good God. Ash could never have his valet take his boots off again.

It was exquisite torture as Francis pulled away to remove the second boot. Ash waited for the release, waited for the slide of stockings and breeches off his legs, until he stood naked as a babe, fiercely erect, with Francis crouching at his feet, looking up.

"We had a wager," Ash reminded him.

Francis reached out and took Ash in hand for one long, slow, agonising lick, spiralling his tongue along the rigid length, then stood. He put a hand on Ash's shoulder and pulled, hard, turning him. Ash braced himself against the table and bent to the pressure of Francis' shove. Francis pushed again, kicking his legs apart, and Ash was on his chest, face against the cold wood, legs splayed. Helpless. Indecent. Ready to be fucked.

"Christ, I'm going to spend," he whispered.

"Not yet. Stay there." Francis' hands were on his buttocks, pulling them apart, running his thumbs between. He let go, stepping away, and was back a moment later, Ash hoped with oil, but did not look round. Francis ran his finger down Ash's cleft again. "Oh, I shall have you now, Lord Gabriel. I shall have this."

"I said. My friends call me Ash."

"And I told you that it wasn't your friendship I desired." Francis bent over him, thin body covering his, to curl his tongue over Ash's earlobe. "What do your lovers call you?"

"I, uh . . ." Ash wasn't sure what his own mother called him, with Francis' rigid buckskin-covered cock pressing against his bare arse and that tongue sliding over and round and *into* his ear. "God."

"I doubt that." Francis moved his mouth to kiss Ash's neck. "I shall call you Gabriel when I take you." He ground his hips against Ash. His voice was low and rough. "Because you're heavenly."

It was hopelessly gauche, the kind of blandishment the clumsiest clodhopper might offer his sweetheart. Ludicrous for Ash to blush so fiercely at it. "You can call me the Duke of Wellington as long as you get your prick in me." He wriggled back against Francis, heard the gasp.

"Be still." Francis withdrew a little, then there was a finger pressing into Ash, slick with oil. "Do you like this?"

"Not as much as—oh fuck Jesus Christ fuck." The bastard had slipped his finger right in, without hesitation, and hit *there*—

"Not as much as . . .?"

Ash wailed, rocking from side to side against the merciless internal pressure that spiked pleasure through him. "It's not your finger I want." Didn't want preparing. Loved the feeling of a thick cock pushing him open.

He wondered how big Francis was.

“Cocksure boy.” There was a tease in Francis’ voice, an almost affectionate sound. He heard the rustle of clothing. “Gabriel.” Three long syllables. Ash disliked his absurd name intensely, but there was something in the way Francis drew out its sounds that made it chime like ancient bells. “What do you say?”

“Francis,” Ash managed. “Francis. Fuck me.”

“With the greatest pleasure.” Francis withdrew his finger in a swift movement that made Ash gasp. “Uh—in just a moment.”

“*What?*” Ash twisted round in outrage, and saw Francis, eyes shut, gripping his erection at the base with an expression that betrayed extreme discomfort. “What the devil . . .?”

Francis opened one eye to glare at him. “I have waited five years for your arse. I have brought myself off more nights than I can count imagining you splayed on my table like the wanton slut I knew you’d be. And if I touch you now I’m going to spend like a raw recruit with his first ladybird and I am *damned* if I fail to give you the tugging you richly deserve.” He squeezed again, hard. “Now be silent and let me think about something else.”

A variety of responses jostled in Ash’s brain—offence, anger, arousal, pleas for Francis to tell him more about how he looked—but he settled on the most important one. “Five years?”

“Ill-mannered, drunken brat,” Francis said softly. “With that glorious hair and those ridiculous eyes.”

“My eyes are not ridiculous.”

“They are. Nobody else has eyes like that. Madder blue, it’s called, that shade of grey-purple.”

Francis knew the colour of his eyes. Ash felt an odd lurch in his chest.

“And you were always there.” Francis released himself and stepped forward. “Forcing your presence on your elders, uninvited. Insisting on gambling, when you are so very unsuited to the gaming tables. Demanding my attention.” He brushed his fingers lightly over Ash’s arse, then reached for the oil. “Setting yourself at me.”

“I never set myself at you,” protested Ash, a man sprawled naked over a table, to the man who was going to fuck him.

“Didn’t you?” Francis’ thumbs were pulling him wide, and Ash felt the blunt pressure of his erection. “You didn’t want me?” He pushed in, against the tight ring of muscle, steady and firm. “When you looked at me throughout those interminable nights, when you thought I wasn’t watching you, when you kept trying to stammer your inarticulate apologies, did I misunderstand your intentions?” He closed his hands on Ash’s hipbones and paused there, with Ash trembling in his grasp. “Have I misunderstood you

now?”

“No!”

Francis rewarded him with another, deeper stroke, then stilled again. His thumbs circled on Ash’s oversensitive skin. “I’m delighted to hear it. And you never thought of this before?” He gave just the slightest push of his hips, still only halfway in, a little taunt. “Hmm?”

He pushed again. Ash’s fingers scrabbled for a purchase on the smooth wood. He was utterly at Francis’ mercy, half penetrated, desperate for more, unable to brace himself. The helplessness was unbearably exciting. He took a little sobbing breath.

“I want you, Gabriel,” Francis said softly. “I have wanted you for a long time. And now I have you.” He clamped a hand on Ash’s shoulder and thrust.

Ash screamed, throwing his head back, careless of discretion in Francis’ capable hands. “Christ! Again.”

“My name,” Francis said through his teeth.

“Francis. Francis. *Oh.*”

Another relentless thrust and Francis’ hips were against Ash’s skin. He paused, breathing deeply, then began a steady rhythm, bearing down on Ash with a twisting motion that made him jerk and flail.

“I have sat at the gaming table so many nights and dreamed of pulling you over it, pushing my cock into your mouth, your hand, your arse . . .”

“Uuh.” Ash was beyond speech, lips pressed to the varnished wood. Francis ground into him, stretching, pleasure and pain and pleasure of pain setting Ash’s nerves aflame. “More. All of it. Oh Jesus, Francis, I won’t last. I’m going to come, I need to—”

“Keep your hands on the table. Don’t touch yourself.”

“*Please.*” Ash was begging, nakedly desperate, writhing under him. “Please let me.”

“Under—no—circumstances.” Francis sounded desperate himself. “Christ, you like a good ride, don’t you? Who’s been having you when it should have been me?”

Nobody worth remembering. A stranger in Hyde Park; some fellow in a darkened molly house; occasional relief with a friend who shared his tastes. Bodies, but sturdy ones; faces, but smiling ones. Nobody with a long lean build and a narrow stare that stripped him to his skin. Nobody he’d wanted.

Ash shook his head, and Francis took a handful of his hair, pulling his head back. “Gabriel. I want all of this.” His other hand gripped Ash’s thigh. “All of you, for me. I’ll make you mine.” Francis was panting, sweating, losing his rhythm, and Ash squirmed helplessly, the friction of his cock against the smooth wood so very nearly enough. “I’ll fuck you till you won’t

ever need another man.”

“Anything. God. Just let me come now. Oh God please, please . . .”

Francis drove into him once more, at just that perfect angle, and Ash was spending, almost painfully, wailing with the fierce pleasure, feeling Francis jerking and shuddering inside him, flooding him with heat. He flopped forwards, gasping, and Francis’ head came to rest heavily on his back.

“Sweet Jesus,” Ash managed and felt a nod against his skin.

They lay over the table for a few moments until Francis withdrew with care and pulled Ash over to the couch, where they sprawled together face to face, Ash’s bare and sweaty skin pressed against Francis’ still-clothed body. Francis’ arm was round Ash’s back. He contemplated Ash’s face for a moment and then, with grave deliberation, dropped a kiss on each eyelid. “Madder blue.”

“So you said. Did you mean it?”

“Of course. I can show you samples—”

“Not my eyes. What you told me.” Ash felt himself flush, but he had to know. “Five years?”

Francis trailed a finger down his face. “Five extremely long years of wondering what you’d do if I suggested exactly this.”

“Why *didn’t* you suggest it?” Ash sounded almost plaintive in his own ears. The idea that he could have had Francis all this time was painful to contemplate.

Francis tilted a brow. “Why didn’t I make possibly unwanted sodomitical advances to the younger brother of a man with whom I have a long-standing mutual animosity?”

Right. Of course. If Ash had taken umbrage, if he’d gone to Mal and given him that weapon against Francis . . . He groaned. “Curse Mal. He’s such a damned nuisance.”

“I’d put it more strongly.”

“It’s not enough for him to be a bully and a brute. He has to interfere in my intimate relations as well?” Ash scowled. “Oaf.”

“True, but may I suggest we forget about him for now? I’d much rather think of you.”

Ash couldn’t argue. He wanted to hear a great deal more about Francis thinking of him. “So why did you make your sodomitical advances now?”

“I saw you in Millay’s.” Ash’s mouth dropped open. “You were letting a guardsman lead you upstairs. Which at least indicated that my, uh, instincts about you were correct, so—”

“No, wait. I was masked.” Millay’s was a house of absolute discretion, a meeting place for those of Ash’s inclinations. Everyone wore dominoes in

the public rooms. The idea that anyone had identified him was appalling. So was the realisation that if he'd been in less of a hurry, Francis might have approached him. The guardsman hadn't even been that good.

"Masked." Francis gave him an affectionate look. "Dear Gabriel. As if a scrap of black silk would disguise that hair or that delectable form. The masks are, at best, a sop."

Now he considered matters, it wouldn't have been hard for him to identify Francis either. "I suppose so. But that was six months ago."

"Indeed it was." Francis kissed his ear. "I have been a very frustrated man."

"Is that what last night was about?" Ash sat up slightly. "Did you plan this? To—to seduce me?"

"The word is ' blackmail.'" Francis rubbed at his face. "And no, I did not intend it, and I'm damned ashamed of myself for suggesting it."

"Well, I'm not," Ash assured him, slinging a bare leg over Francis' buckskin. "It was a remarkably good idea, to my mind."

"It was unconscionable behaviour, and so was last night. My temper got the better of me. It is really not my habit to ruin feckless young men who couldn't play a decent hand of piquet to save their souls, and I have received some strong representations about my conduct."

"From whom?"

"Richard Vane, amongst others." Ash blinked, unable to see why the leader of the Ricardians would give a damn for his affairs. Francis evidently saw his bewilderment. "Richard is a very moral man. And right, damn him. I took your money out of frustration and anger and a great deal of thwarted need, and that was hardly the act of a gentleman."

"I chose to play."

"You did, but you are quite startlingly inept. I played at too great an advantage."

"It was a fair game," Ash objected. "You won."

"It was a fair game but not a fair contest. My intention tonight—my original intention—was to redress my error of judgement and restore your property without hurting your pride." Francis grimaced. "I fell very short of that."

"My pride is intact," Ash assured him. "I can't say the same for the rest of my anatomy." Francis gave a quick bark of laughter. Ash had never heard him laugh before, and felt himself grinning ridiculously in response. "But about that, the winnings . . ."

"Firstly, I shall take grave exception if you call me a liar again. Secondly, I should be quite hurt if you gave way to my desires only to flee the country on the morrow. I hope I'm better than that." Francis kissed his

ear. "We shall say that we wagered the lot on a roll of the dice and you won. Nobody would believe it if we mentioned cards."

"I'm not sure I should accept that."

"I wish you will. For my reputation, if not your comfort. I should prefer not to be known as a ruiner of young men." Ash looked down at his naked body and raised a brow meaningfully. Francis gave him a look. "You know what I mean. There is quite enough bad blood between me and your brother without adding to it."

Ash took a deep breath. "True. Very well. I can't deny, I'd rather not flee to the Continent. I don't even speak French. Francis . . ."

"Mmm?"

"Will we do this again?"

Francis looked down at him, arm tightening. "You didn't answer my question, you know. What do your lovers call you?"

It had tended to be *Ash*, from his friend, or *Sir*, from the anonymous and the paid. "By *lover*, do you mean tugging?"

"Not just that, no. I mean one with whom you hope to have a long and pleasurable association. One to whom you are . . . special."

"I've never had a lover, then." Ash looked up into that shrewd, intelligent face, the eyes fixed on his, and plucked up his courage. "But, if I did, I think he might call me Gabriel."

"So do I." Francis kissed him again. "Though I have a condition. If you are to be my lover, my Gabriel, I must insist that you learn to play piquet."

Ash groaned. "Oh God, really?"

"I shall teach you."

"I doubt you can."

Francis tapped him on the nose. "You underestimate yourself. You do that quite often, I think."

Ash wasn't sure what that meant, but it was scarcely the most important question. "Will we wager on it?"

"Of course."

"This sort of wager?"

"It's quite possible."

Ash clicked his tongue. "Playing with you, Mr. Webster? I fear you'll ruin me."

"It is my aim, and would be my privilege, to ruin you for all others for a very long time to come."

Ash leaned into his embrace, burying his face in Francis' shirt to hide his smile. "In that case . . . I hope you have a shilling."



About KJ Charles

KJ Charles is an editor and writer. She lives in London with her husband, two kids, an out-of-control garden and an increasingly murderous cat.

KJ writes mostly romance, gay and straight, frequently historical, and usually with some fantasy or horror in there.

Contact

Website: kjcharleswriter.com

Twitter: twitter.com/kj_charles

Facebook: facebook.com/kjcharleswriter

Email: kjcharleswriter@gmail.com



UNFAIR IN LOVE AND WAR

by
Kaje Harper

Warren Burch paused on his mother's stoop and set his suitcase at his feet. It'd been a long, long day, with his train delayed several times by troop transports. In the waning light, he glanced around the familiar front porch. A dozen little things needed doing; there was paint peeling on the railing, a crack in the mortar of the steps. Things that should have been fixed months ago, if he hadn't been in Philadelphia, and Charlie . . . He suddenly missed Charlie with a visceral ache. The old house felt like home, and yet it would never be the same. He straightened his shoulders and raised his hand to the doorbell.

A sudden crash and tinkle of broken glass off to his left made him jump and whirl around. There was nothing visible on the twilight street. He heard a burst of loud, unpleasant laughter and the sound of running feet from the other side of the hedge between his mother's house and the neighbor's. Warren leaped down the front steps, stumbling on his bad leg, and managed a lopsided run down the front walkway. Despite his effort at speed, when he rounded the hedge all he could see was the back view of a trio of young ruffians, already halfway to the next corner, boisterously jostling each other as they sprinted away.

For a moment he thought about chasing them, but they were sure to be faster. *No hope. No point.* Instead he turned to the house behind the hedge. It was like his mother's—small, boxy, made of yellow brick, with four front steps and a white door between large, matching front windows. When he'd last been living at home, Mrs. Richardson had owned it, grimly clinging to her independence. Now one of the two windows was covered by a board, nailed to the frame. The other was shattered, a big hole smashed in the center with jagged glass shards clinging around the edges. Warren only noticed the breakage in passing, because his gaze was drawn irresistibly to the front door, and the big swastika painted in dripping red on its smooth surface.

As he stared, the door opened. A man stepped through onto the stoop. He stood looking straight at Warren, backlit, his blond hair frosted near-white, his eyes shadowed and dark. He was tall, lean, with cheekbones that might cut glass, and the icy beauty of a Teutonic hero. And young, very young. The man glanced at the window, then at the door. For an instant he looked furious, even dangerous. Then, like a shutter coming down, his face went frozen and still. He stepped back inside without a word, and silently closed the door.

Warren was left standing at the end of the path, watching the red paint slowly run down the door.

"Well, hell," he said softly under his breath. He had a sudden urge to go

explain that he'd neither broken the window nor just stood by and watched. But that icy rejection didn't invite his approach. After another long hesitation, Warren turned away and headed back to his mother's door.

When he rang the bell, she answered it immediately and went from anxious to delighted as she made out his face. "Warren! Darling, what are you doing home?"

He took off his hat and gave her a hug. "Couldn't bear to stay away from the best home cooking this side of the Mississippi."

"Well, if you'd been willing to find a nice girl and settle down, you might have had home cooking closer to hand," she said tartly. He tensed, but it was a well-worn bit of byplay between them, more habit than anything, and his mother let it drop. She hooked her hand into the crook of his arm and pulled him inside. "Come on. Give me your coat. Sit, tell me about your life, your job. How long can you stay?"

"Thanks. It's good to be home." He pushed the door shut behind them, and even thought about locking it, although common sense said the boys were long gone. "The neighborhood's gone downhill a bit, though." It made a good distraction from his personal life, and he had to admit he was curious. "Your neighbor's house appears to have been vandalized."

"Again?" His mother frowned. "Some of those local boys are a menace. Too young for work or war, but old enough to make all kinds of trouble. What did they do now?"

"Broke a window." He hesitated with the rest, feeling oddly as if he might be betraying a trust. But it would no doubt be all over the neighborhood tomorrow, no matter how fast the man cleaned it off. Warren had seen old Mrs. Cleveland's curtains move across the street as he'd turned away. "And they painted a swastika on the door."

"Oh dear!"

"There was a man in there . . . Is he one of Mrs. Richardson's family?"

"No, darling, she sold the house. Two years ago."

When his mother didn't continue, he had to ask, "So you have a new neighbor. *Is* he German?"

"Oh, no," she said. "He's Swiss. I've seen his passport. He kindly showed it to me after the last time so that I needn't be too worried." Her eyes drifted to her front window where the service flag hung, its single star now gold.

Warren said, around the sudden tightness in his throat, "The last time?" He didn't look at that flag, his mother's reminder, every minute of every day, that Charlie would never be coming home again. *Focus on the mystery, the guy next door.* "What happened last time?"

"They broke a window with a rock. Smashed a hole right through it. If

Elsa Tillens was still living there, she'd have given them what for, I assure you."

"I don't think I know her," Warren said.

"She bought the house two years ago, after Mrs. Richardson moved out. If you'd been home more, you'd have met her." His mother gave his arm a nudge. "Amazing old lady. She must have been ninety if she was a day, but she worked in her garden every day, right up until the end. Passed away in June."

"Has *he* been living there long?"

"Mr. Koehler? He moved in with her. He's a grandson or great nephew or something. I'm not sure. They were neither of them big talkers. He drove her places, did the heavy work, carried her laundry. I guess he inherited the house when she passed on."

Warren wanted to ask more, to get a first name, age, some kind of handle on that icy Adonis he'd seen for such a brief moment, but instead he asked, "When did the hoodlums break the first window?"

"Oh, two weeks ago? It was when we got the news of the liberation of Paris. Some of the lads were in high spirits, and it turned a bit ugly."

"What do the police say?"

"Well, they came and looked and went away again. Not much they could do, really."

"But you know who it was?"

"Not by name." His mother frowned. "There are quite a few young lads running about getting into mischief. It's hard to grudge them a fling or two before they go into the service, but some of it's mean-spirited and destructive."

"They should be kept busy in school now, surely? It's September."

"It's not the ones who stayed in school that are the problem." His mother sighed, then patted his shoulder. "Enough about them. Tell me about you. What brings you here? And without writing to me first?"

"Well, the firm closed down. I could have found new work back in Philadelphia, of course, but I thought if I was job hunting anyway, I might as well do it close to home and save my rent money. If you're willing to put me up?"

"Of course I am." She hugged him. "Whether it's for a week or long term. But won't you miss your friends? And having a place of your own?"

"Are you kidding? A single bachelor apartment, or a whole house and garden with home cooking thrown in? That's an easy choice." He said it lightly and didn't think about logistics and privacy and the reasons he'd moved away to Philly in the first place. "And my friends, well, most of them are off to the war by now. It was getting too hard to watch them all join up,

and not be fit to go too.”

“Darling.” She pulled him closer, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “That’s not your fault.”

“I know.” The polio that had given him a shortened left leg was no one’s fault, but that didn’t mean he had to enjoy feeling a coward when kids like Charlie went off cheerfully to face a rain of bullets on some foreign shore.

His mother put her hand on his cheek. “We have to accept God’s plan for us. I used to rage at Him, you know, for letting the polio take Elizabeth and lame you. But now I know He was making sure I’d have one son safe through this awful war. You hate it, Warren-love, but I find it a great comfort.”

What could he say to that? “You’re right, of course, Mother. So, is my room vacant by any chance?”

She laughed. “You know it is. Did you bring a bag? Or did you just come with the clothes you stand up in?”

“It’s outside the door.” He went and fetched his case. For a minute he waited on the stoop, listening, but he heard nothing untoward, from the street or next door. No sound of the vandals, and none to suggest the neighbor was cleaning up the mess. Just quiet, as if nothing had happened.

Eventually he lugged the suitcase up to his childhood room. There were two bedrooms under the eaves. The one to the east had been his. As he set his bag on the bed and started to unpack, he remembered that his window overlooked the house next door, over the top of the cedar hedge. He was drawn inexorably to the glass, cupping his hands around his face to look out into the dark.

The upstairs room directly across from his showed no light, but through the side window below he could see into a parlor of some kind. One small electric lamp shed a soft glow from a low table. The visible walls were lined with books, far more than he would ever have expected, the bindings looking like the subtle shades of leather and not the more lurid paper covers of dime novels. He wanted to handle them, could almost smell the leather and old paper, but then Koehler came into the room, and Warren’s attention shifted.

Koehler strode up to a shelf, took out a book, then shoved it back with a force that made the antiquarian in Warren cringe. Koehler roamed the room, staring at the shelves, every step graceful, powerful despite his lean build. He shifted in and out of Warren’s view, touching a spine here, pulling a book halfway out there. Each time he rejected his choice and moved on, again, and again, until Warren was ready to yell at him. Finally, Koehler took down a volume and carried it to a wingback chair. He sat upright, every motion precise, his perfect profile to Warren, and opened the book on his

knees. And then he closed the cover, laid the book carefully on the floor, and doubled over, arms wrapped around his middle, and wept.

It was a tight, restrained, private-looking grief. Warren moved quickly to close his drapes. Whatever Koehler was dealing with, it wasn't something for strangers to watch. Warren turned his back, opened his closet, and began to hang his clothes. But all through unpacking, and a late dinner with his mother, and a long bath, and bed at last, the image of that cool, controlled man crying haunted him.

Even when he dozed, the phantom sound of sobbing lay in wait in his dreams. He woke, over and over, wondering if his mother was crying for Charlie, if he should go to her. But each time, when he'd dashed the last of sleep from his eyes and ears, the house was silent all around him. When he tried to drop off again, here in this childhood home, the ghost of his little brother visited him, laughing, teasing, saying his name before running away into darkness. It was nearly dawn before he fell deep asleep at last.



He was woken by the steady thud of a hammer. The angle of the sun said it was mid-morning, so he had no real cause for complaint. When he stretched, stood, and went to his window to pull back the curtain, he found even less cause. His mother's neighbor stood in his own back yard, sleeves rolled up, cutting and nailing some boards together. After a moment's stunned admiration for the lean muscles showing through the sweat-damp shirt, Warren realized the man was probably making a panel to cover the broken window. Which was really a job better done by two people . . .

He dressed fast, choosing rougher clothes for working in. As he hurried downstairs, he saw no sign of his mother. It was Sunday, and she'd be at church, he realized. He was stunned that she hadn't woken him for it.

In the entry, he quickly laced his shoes: the normal one, and the other with its thickened sole. He had a moment's qualm, as always when meeting someone new. He *hated* the look of pity that always met his limping steps. But there was no way around that, except past it. He straightened his shoulders and let himself out the front door.

Next door, the swastika had been cleaned off imperfectly, a hint of pink still visible. The window glass still gaped. As Warren rounded the hedge and made his way down the side of Koehler's house, the sounds of hammering from the back ceased. He reached the corner and almost bumped into Koehler, who was coming the other way carrying the large, cobbled-together sheet of wood. Koehler startled and staggered. Warren quickly grabbed a corner of the board to steady it. "Sorry. Didn't mean to surprise you."

Koehler lowered the board, looking at him coolly, all surprise schooled out of his expression. "That's quite all right, Mr. . . .?"

"Burch. Warren Burch. That's my mother's house next door."

"Ah." Koehler's eyes warmed slightly. "Of course. You must be Charlie's brother, then." He froze at his own words and added carefully. "I am so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Warren hesitated, unsure whether to offer to shake hands. The slab of wood between them was a clumsy obstacle. Instead he reached a hand to the nearest corner. "Can I help you with this?"

"I can manage."

"It'd go easier with two, though." He gave his best smile.

Koehler didn't return it, but he did say, "That is true. Thank you."

Warren bent and lifted his end, wishing silently that he'd thought of gloves for handling the rough boards. As he backed up, carefully guiding his end, he said, "I saw the broken window last night."

"Ah. Yes." Koehler's voice was crisp and clear, but there was an undeniable accent, the Swiss indistinguishable to Warren's ears from German. He could see why there might be trouble, however wrong-headed it was.

"They're idiots. Troublemakers," he said.

"They are afraid, and angry."

"That's a generous way to put it."

"It is only truth." They reached the front and together lowered the board to the grass in front of the window. Koehler looked at him steadily. "I speak as I do, look as I am. They see the face of the enemy."

"Well, given how many thousands of German-Americans there are, let alone Swiss, they'd better start looking more carefully." Warren turned to the window. "All right. How do you want to do this?"

"I thought to nail it to the frame. Perhaps if you would hold it in place?"

"Sure."

They worked together in silence broken only by the sure, sharp strokes of Koehler's hammer driving in the nails. When it was done, they stepped back. Warren said, "Well, it'll do for now, I suppose. But you'll want to get the glass replaced."

"Yes." Koehler looked at his feet. "I do want that, but . . ."

"What?"

Koehler shrugged. "It is common in wartime. Materials are hard to come by. I am told by Mr. Tolliver in the hardware store that glass windows this big may be difficult to find for months. Perhaps longer."

"Really?" Warren frowned. Rubber, steel, aluminum, maybe even plywood, sure. Those were needed for the war effort. But he wasn't aware of

a glass shortage.

“Or perhaps it is just for someone like me that these things take time.”

Warren felt a surge of anger, especially when Koehler added, “Mr. Tolliver has had two sons wounded fighting the Germans in France.”

“That’s no damned excuse for him to treat you like some kind of leper or saboteur.”

“Well, I seem suspicious, do I not?” Koehler’s lips curved slightly. “I arrived here after the war began, with only an elderly doddering lady to vouch for me. I look like a recruiting poster for the Third Reich, my English is still not so good, and now the lady is dead and I live alone. I might well *be* a saboteur.”

“I doubt it,” Warren said tartly. “My mother likes you.”

Koehler laughed, and the sudden relaxation of his features made him look like a boy. A stunning boy. Warren took a breath.

Koehler said, “Mothers. They are, what do you say? The salt of the earth.” He held out his hand. “I am Stefan Koehler. It is good to make your acquaintance. Please, call me Stefan.”

Warren took that proffered hand, longer than his own, narrower, rougher. “Warren.” Their grips were matched, and he didn’t think it was his imagination that they both held on just a fraction too long.

Nor that Stefan’s next words were, “So, is there a Mrs. Warren?”

“No. Although if my mother could have her way, no doubt there would be.”

Stefan tilted his head a fraction, eyes narrowed. “And will she have her way?”

Warren met his gaze. Those eyes were blue all right, but not the ice blue that went with the hair and cheekbones. They were soft, clear, like summer skies. Stefan’s expression held a hint of warmth despite the way he’d stilled, waiting for Warren’s reply.

“No,” Warren said deliberately. “She won’t.”

He saw that go home, message clear and received. Stefan’s eyes widened and darkened flatteringly.

Warren had always known what he was and who he wanted. Before leaving home, he’d sublimated it with heated sessions over his physical culture magazines. When he’d first moved to Philadelphia, there’d been enough like-minded young men if you knew where to look. He’d been with his share and had no complaints. But he was almost thirty, dark and common-looking, and lame, however slight the deformity. To have a man this lovely take a breath and flush in response to his glance was heady praise.

Stefan recovered swiftly of course. Took a step back and bent to pick up the hammer and jar of nails from the grass. “Thank you for your help.”

"Any time," he said, emphasizing the *any*. Then he added, more casually, "I wish I could have pointed out the culprits to the police. I didn't get a good look."

"Nor did I." Stefan gave him another swift glance from under lowered brows. "At the time, I thought it might have been you. But you were not laughing."

"No."

"One may hope that they are now satisfied and done with me," Stefan said. "So. Do you have to go? Or can I offer you something to drink? I have no beer, but I have some apple cider."

"My mother would skin me if I drank beer on a Sunday anyway," Warren said easily. "Cider sounds good."

"Come, then. I will put the tools in the shed, and we can go in by the back door."

That door opened into a small, tidy kitchen. Warren noted that, unlike some of the bachelors of his acquaintance, Stefan didn't leave dirty plates in the sink or crumbs on the counter. The room smelled slightly of toast, but it was a pleasant aroma. Stefan pulled out a chair for him. "Here, sit down. I will get the cider."

Warren sat, pleased that Stefan had so far made no direct reference to his limp or his shoe, although no doubt he'd noticed. Good manners, that. He glanced around as Stefan opened the icebox. There were signs of a woman's touch everywhere: frills on the window curtains, rooster figurines along the tops of the cabinets, a row of cookbooks held in place by bookends of fanciful cows in pinafores. Not that he hadn't met one or two men capable of choosing frilled curtains, but he thought even they'd have drawn the line at those cows. "You moved here with your grandmother? I'm sorry for your loss, too."

"My great-aunt, yes. My grandmother's oldest sister. I only met her four years ago, but it was a privilege to have known her." Stefan set a glass in front of him and dropped gracefully into the other chair.

"Have you been in America long, then?"

"Four years." Stefan took a sip, eyes guarded. "I came over from Switzerland in February 1940."

"Right at the beginning of the war, then."

"Yes."

Warren wanted to say, "You must have been very young." But that was something no man really liked to hear, and he already felt too much of a gap between them. He said, "1939. That was the spring the architects I clerked for closed up shop. No one was building new houses, and the business went under. I started working for Lockland Refrigerators. Parts and supplies."

“So you are an office man?”

Warren decided to say it first. He slapped his leg. “Not fit for much else. Polio as a kid.”

“Ah. I did wonder. But you seemed to do all right muscling around the wood and tools.”

“Not fit for marching. Anyway, I like solving puzzles. And as the war tooled up, getting parts for the refrigerators became a puzzle indeed.”

“So do you still work there? Are you here on a holiday?”

“No. We got converted to war production, and my job was redundant with another guy’s. He had a family, while I was free to move on, so I have. I wanted to see my mother anyway, now that . . .” He swallowed, ambushed by that sudden grief. “Now that Charlie’s gone. I want to support my mother, get another job where I’ll make a direct contribution to the war effort. I’m here to stay, for the foreseeable future, anyway.”

Stefan met his eyes. “Would it be forward of me to say I am glad?”

Warren said, “I like men who are forward.”

For a moment he wondered if Stefan might take the next step. Those high cheekbones were tinged with red, and Stefan’s breath came faster as he bit his lower lip to a matching red. But instead he sat back and took another long drink of cider. They were dancing around the topic. It was fraught, this game of suggestion and interpretation, fear and trust. If you were wrong, the consequences were disastrous. But Warren was sure he wasn’t wrong. Pretty sure.

They talked then of simpler things, of the annoying schedule of buses going into town, of gas rationing, of the large victory gardens both his mother and Stefan’s great-aunt had planted in the spring, which were no doubt going to be a good part of their own fall chores for another month. Warren watched Stefan’s mouth and hands, and caught Stefan doing the same.

“I should learn how to can and preserve,” Stefan said. “Tante Elsa thought a man did not belong in the kitchen and insisted on doing it all last year. I’ve been giving away the excess produce this summer, but that is lazy of me.”

“Or kind,” Warren suggested.

Stefan shrugged. “I remember being hungry.” He pressed his lips together and stood abruptly. “More cider?”

“No, thanks.”

“Give me your glass, then. I will wash it.”

Warren stood. “I’ll dry.”

“For two glasses?”

Warren smiled, letting a bit of heat show. “My mother will be at church

for another hour. I thought we might get the chores done fast.” *There. If that wasn’t a clear invitation, nothing was.*

Stefan took a short, sharp breath. “Chores might wait.”

“Good idea.” Warren reached for him slowly, certain by now he was wanted, but far from sure Stefan might not still spook. Stefan’s pupils were blown wide, and a fine tremor shook the tumblers he held. Warren put his hands on the glasses, pried them slowly out of Stefan’s grip, and set them in the sink. He held Stefan’s gaze. “Yes?”

“Yes.” Stefan lunged, no other word for it, his hand tight on Warren’s hip, eyes eager as they pressed together. Then he jumped back. “Not here. Upstairs. Safer. I will lock the doors.”

Warren could understand the desire for caution. “Where?”

“My bedroom. Left at the top of the stair.” Stefan snapped the latch over on the back door and headed for the front.

Warren climbed the stairs and turned into a room the mirror image of his own. Heavy drapes hung beside the window, and he pulled them across the glass, dimming the room. Downstairs he could hear Stefan’s footsteps, hurrying, crossing the house for something. He hesitated, then reached for his shirt buttons. He wanted to make it impossible to go any way but forward.

By the time Stefan reached the room, Warren was naked and stretched out on the narrow single bed. He thought his instincts had been good, because Stefan came in saying, “We do not have to . . .” And then he stopped, staring at him.

Warren looked up from where he lay, his shoulders propped on Stefan’s pillows, and twitched the sheet off his hips, baring his erection blatantly. “Yeah. We kind of do.”

“Oh.” Stefan looked down at him, then met his eyes and swallowed. “That is . . .”

Warren crooked a finger. “Come here. Get undressed. Tell me what you want.”

“What I want?” Stefan came closer, moving stiffly, as if against his will.

“Yes.” Warren frowned. “You *have* done this before?” If he’d imagined he was seducing a virgin, he’d have gone a hell of a lot slower. Or not at all.

Stefan tossed his chin higher, confusion fading to arrogance. “Of course I have.”

“Then come here.”

Stefan came to the side of the bed and slid his braces off his shoulders. He slowly unbuttoned his work shirt, although his eyes were avoiding Warren’s again. “It is just, in English, I do not know if I have the words.”

“Okay. We’ll skip words.” Warren swung his legs over to sit on the edge of the bed, trapping Stefan’s knees between his own. He laid his palm on the flat, silky, almost hairless stomach under that shirt. Stefan jumped and swore under his breath. Warren kept his fingers there, rubbing a little circle as Stefan shrugged the shirt off his arms. “Just tell me, how long has it been?”

At first he thought Stefan wasn’t going to answer. Those long, callused fingers brushed his as Stefan methodically unbuttoned his own trousers and pushed them down. Clean, white underwear tented out nicely from his groin; he was clearly still interested. Warren moved his hand lower, brushing over the bulge in the fabric. Stefan gasped, then said hoarsely, “Five years. So you will have to go slowly.”

“Five years?” He took his hand away, staring up into Stefan’s wide blue eyes. “Not since you came here?”

“No.” Stefan took Warren’s wrist and very deliberately placed his hand back where it had been. “And I do want this.” He stood still for a moment as Warren stroked him, then stepped back and took off his underwear too.

Stefan’s skin was very fair where the sun hadn’t touched it, with fine blue veins under the translucent pallor of his hips, and thicker ropey veins along his cock. He had almost no hair, just a small golden nest around that jutting erection. His arms and neck were tanned to caramel brown, but the rest of him was like one of those Greek statues, carved in marble. He straightened, tilted his head, and canted one hip, clearly inviting Warren to look at him. His prick stood out, arching up, long and uncircumcised, the pink tip just emerging from the hood.

Warren licked his lips. “Come here.”

“You will go slow?” Stefan took a step forward against the bed, back between Warren’s knees.

“I want to suck you, boy,” Warren growled, his deep voice surprising in his own ears. “How slow do you need that to be?”

“Oh!” There was an odd note in Stefan’s voice. “I have not done that.”

Warren wrapped his fingers around each angled hip and tightened his hands. “But you want to?”

“Yes.” It was more breath than words.

Warren leaned down and drew the tip of his tongue in one slow stroke up the underside of that pretty prick. Stefan shivered between his hands and gasped. Warren mouthed over the tip, already tasting the sweet seep of liquid. As he licked around the sensitive flesh, he mumbled, “What have you done, if not this?”

“I . . . Ah, *Gott!* I have used my mouth. And the rear, my ass. I have bent over . . . Oh! Yes!”

Warren sucked harder and released him with a pop. "Did you enjoy it? Getting taken from behind that way?"

"What?" Stefan's expression was dazed, just from a few moments of Warren's attention. "Oh." The pause stretched a bit. "Yes. It was, um, sometimes good. Eventually."

Sometimes good, eventually. Warren felt a sudden desire to ram a nice telephone pole up the ass of whoever had been Stefan's first. "It should be good all the time. Not that there isn't a bit of a stretch and a burn, but it should be more than worth it."

"I have at times enjoyed it," Stefan said, color rising higher on his cheeks and neck.

Warren decided then and there to show Stefan what bending for a man really could be like. Someday, not now, because he needed some Vaseline and a lot of time for that. For now, he put his well-honed oral skills to work, licking and sucking, sliding his tongue under the sensitive foreskin and around the sweet, smooth curves of the head. Stefan moaned and bucked into his mouth, hands clutching at the empty air.

Warren pulled off and nuzzled in toward his balls until Stefan slid his foot sideways, giving Warren more room. Warren licked his sac, then looked up. "Hold my head. Fuck my mouth."

"You do not mind?"

"Stefan, I want you to fuck me with that lovely prick so deep that it's down my throat when you come."

"Oh!" Stefan's hips jerked helplessly forward, his damp tip dragging across Warren's unshaven jaw. Warren opened his mouth and let go of one hip to wedge his hand in where he could finger Stefan's balls. He sucked hard on Stefan's cockhead while stroking the thin skin under his soft curls, cradling his balls, tugging lightly. Stefan's fingers clamped onto his skull. With a series of short, sharp grunts, Stefan took him at his word, thrusting deep in his mouth. Warren concentrated on opening his throat, pacing his breath, and letting Stefan take control, as much and as hard as he wanted. Even now, thrusting, thighs jittering and shaking, fingers clenched, making garbled wordless sounds, Stefan was more considerate than many men Warren had knelt for.

Stefan drew back eventually and hesitated, clearly balanced on the cusp. Warren let him try to hold on, then sucked him deep and swallowed and swallowed, closing his fingers on tender balls with a firm tug. Stefan moaned, cursed, and came in a shaking flood that even Warren couldn't handle. He slipped off enough to let the slick drip out the corner of his mouth, keeping up a slow, sensual suckling and a soft rub of his fingers.

At last Stefan said, "*Gott im Himmel*. Warren. So fine you are." His

hands eased their grip, stroking Warren's hair.

Warren let that softening prick slide out of his lips and smiled with satisfaction. Stefan put out a shaking finger and swiped a trail of cum from the corner of Warren's mouth. "Thank you. That was . . . I have no words. That was excellent."

Warren rubbed against Stefan's hand, dragging his whiskered jaw over those calluses. "My pleasure. Truly."

Stefan looked down at Warren's groin and smiled. "I see that it was. Shall I, er, do something about that?"

Warren rubbed his own erection, standing ruddy and needy between his hairy thighs. "You want to?"

"Oh, yes. This I have done. I enjoy it." Stefan pressed Warren's knees wider and knelt. "Let me."

Warren put his hands on Stefan's bowed head as he took Warren's erection in his mouth. Stefan licked at him tentatively, then shifted position and went deeper. Warren played his fingers through the fine blond strands of Stefan's hair while he sucked with far more enthusiasm than skill. It was clearly not his first time, but no one had taught him much. Warren couldn't keep from asking, "How old were you last time you did this?"

Stefan pulled off and looked up to meet his eyes. "Eighteen. Am I not doing it right?"

Warren felt an oddly tender rush of sentiment and smiled at his anxious face. "You're just fine. Better than fine. Don't stop."

Stefan bent again, and Warren stroked him, hair and temples and the translucent curves of his ears, as he licked and slurped. There was a line where his tanned neck gave way to the tender, pale skin of his shoulders, and Warren brushed his fingers there. Stefan whimpered and suddenly Warren came, heat flashing through his groin until he cried out.

Stefan choked, licked him, and then sat back on his heels, looking endearingly pleased with himself. "This skill I have not forgotten."

Warren held in a laugh. "Indeed not. And I've found that talent like yours just gets better and better with more practice."

Stefan nodded. "I should endeavor to practice again soon, then." He frowned and stood. "Will you . . .? Do you . . .?"

"I hope we both get many chances to practice on each other," Warren told him, pleased to see the frown between those pale brows smooth out. "If you want to, of course."

"Oh, yes." Stefan's smile was almost shy. "I would like that."

They dressed side by side. Warren stole frequent glances, emboldened by the way Stefan kept his eyes down on his own clothing. God, the man was beautiful. Amazing that no one else had seen it yet, on this continent

anyway. Amazing that Stefan had enough interest in Warren's ordinary, almost-thirty carcass to take him up on his proposition. It couldn't last, of course. Once Stefan broke through his shyness or whatever had held him back, he'd be in high demand. He'd have his choice of partners. Like prodding at an infected tooth, Warren couldn't resist saying, "Have you been out to any lavender bars, in Madison maybe?"

Stefan looked over, startled. "No. Are there any?"

"Bound to be at least one," Warren said. "A town that size? It's just a matter of finding it. Do you want to?"

"I do not know. Why?"

"To meet other men? For variety?"

"Do you like variety?" There was a bleak note in Stefan's voice as he looked down at his fingers fastening his braces more snugly to his waistband.

It hit Warren that right now variety was the last thing on his own mind. Well, variety or sharing Stefan with other men a moment before he had to. "Not really. But I did when I was your age. It was all new and an adventure."

Stefan's wry smile was years older than the rest of him. "I believe I have had enough adventures."

The reminder that he knew very little about this man caught Warren with an odd sense of surprise. It shouldn't have. Stefan was a stranger, really.

In the past, Warren had fucked guys he hadn't even seen clearly, let alone known by name, in bar washrooms and back rooms he'd never visit again. This time had felt different. But really, it was only a small step up. It would pay for him to remember that. "I'm not complaining if you want to do your practice with me," he said lightly. *Time to ease back.* "I should head home. Will you let me know if you come up against other chores that need an extra pair of hands?"

"Yes. Of course. Thank you."

He saw the curtain of politeness come down, erasing the animation of Stefan's features. A moment later, Stefan was once again that remote Greek statue. "Come, I will show you out."

As they unlocked the front door, Warren glanced over at the boards now covering both windows. "You should tell Mr. Tolliver that you need replacement windows now, even if it has to be multiple small panes. He must have something that would work, either new or reclaimed."

"Thank you for your help." It wasn't agreement.

Warren hesitated, frowning a while longer at that makeshift slab of weathered wood. But eventually, without looking back, he made his way down the steps. His mother would be back from church soon. Behind him,

he heard Stefan's door click shut. And heard the lock snap closed again, too.

His frown deepened as he made his limping way around on the grass to his mother's front door.



Warren woke the next morning to the almost forgotten smell of bacon frying. It got him out of bed faster than he would have believed possible. He washed quickly, scraped the whiskers off his chin, and dressed in his second best suit. When he got down to the kitchen, his sister, Laura, stood at the stove. She looked up as he came in, gave a little squeal, and jumped into his open arms. "Warren!" She hugged him hard, then smacked his arm. "Mom told me in church yesterday that you were here, and asked me to come by because she had early prayer meeting. You didn't write to me. I'm hurt." She faked a sniff.

He set her away carefully. "I didn't tell anyone. Your bacon's burning."

"Oh!" She hurried to dish it onto a single plate, added toast without butter but thickly spread with jam, and a little dish of applesauce, and handed it to him. "Here, eat."

"Where's yours?" He sat at the kitchen table, where a single place was set.

"Are you joking?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "The babies are up by five a.m. I ate hours ago."

"What time is it? And where *are* your sweet, lovely offspring?" He put a little sneer into that for siblings' sake, although he realized with a pang that it had been nine months since he'd seen his niece and nephew. They must be walking and talking by now.

"It's after eight. And Joe's working an evening shift. He's home with the twins."

"Lucky man," Warren said, more softly than he'd planned.

"I'm the lucky one." She came and sat beside him, putting a glass of milk at his hand. "Oh, Warren, I wish you would have children too. Is it so impossible?"

He winced and looked down at the slice of toast he was tearing into pieces. "Yeah. It is." He'd told his family, perhaps five years ago now, when he hadn't been able to take one more wistful hint from his mother about grandchildren and the family name, or one more round of having her introduce him to every girl she knew in his short visits home. He'd somehow found the nerve, back before Pearl Harbor, when that sort of thing had mattered more. He'd told them he was a "confirmed bachelor" and didn't have an interest in marrying, or children, or the trappings of family life. He'd

almost said, "the trap of family life." He'd seen too many men of his persuasion convinced into unhappy marriages. Not for him. But he did regret the children.

Laura gave his arm an awkward pat. "I'm sorry."

He managed a sideways smile. "Oh, don't be sorry. I'm not the one getting up at five a.m."

"You would make some woman such a wonderful husband, though. And I'd love my little ones to have cousins, with the Burch family name. Now that Charlie . . ."

"Don't you start that." Warren took a big bite of his toast to stopper his mouth. Once he'd convinced his mother that it wasn't a joke or a phase, which had taken some doing, she'd fastened her hopes for a namesake for their father on Charlie. But a grave over in blood-soaked France was never going to produce an heir for Thomas Burch. Neither was Warren, though, ever.

Laura sighed. "You just . . . You don't look or seem . . . that way."

Warren gave her a deliberately saucy grin. "Many don't. I knew this stevedore once, arms bigger around than my thighs . . ."

She smacked him on the arm again, harder. "I don't want to know." It had the effect of shaking off their melancholy, though, and Laura stood briskly. "So how long are you staying?"

"A long time, I hope."

She turned back from the sink to stare at him. "Seriously?"

"Yes. My job got cut, and I thought, if I had to find a new one, why not here, close to Mother and your little ragamuffins?"

"My children are angels," she said haughtily, then laughed. "At least when they're asleep. But that's wonderful news."

"Yeah. I thought, well, Mother seemed a bit . . . off, the last few letters. More sad than ever." Worse than sad, although he didn't put his worry into words.

"Yes." Laura's voice thinned. "It's hardest for Mother, of course. Charlie was her baby. It'll be lovely for her to have you here."

"This morning I'm going to check with Uncle Sebastien and see if there's work for me at the plant."

"You'd seriously work for Uncle Sebastien?"

Warren shrugged off his own unease. "Well, he's a bit of a prig, but it's the best war production work in town and I want . . . I need . . . After Charlie, I want to feel I'm doing my part."

Laura's expression softened. "I understand. Good luck, then. And eat your breakfast. You'll need the energy."

As he ate, Laura filled him in on extended family, between accounts of

the things her children were doing and saying. He didn't have to do more than nod, laugh now and then, and finish his bacon. But when he was done and carrying his plate to the sink, she said, "You'll have to come and see us as soon as you can. Drop in any time. And we'll be over here for Saturday lunch, of course. I hope you won't be too lonely or bored after Philadelphia. This isn't like the big city, or even Madison. We're a pretty small town."

"I know. I grew up here." He gave her a hug. "I'll find interests, I'm sure." Unbidden, a vision of blue eyes, flushed cheeks, and a straining neck came to mind. He shoved the thought away. "I'll be kindly Uncle Warren and take the infants to the park to feed the ducks."

"Good luck doing that." She blinked and smiled up at him. "Last time, Stevie almost fell in, looking at his reflection, and Suzie tried to catch a duck and got pecked."

"I'll bring a leash. Two leashes." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Damn. I've got to clean up and get going. Thanks for breakfast, sis."

"You're welcome. Say hello to Uncle Sebastien for me." Her smile developed a hint of mischief.

"I don't want to know why that makes you gleeful, sis, but I think I'll skip the family greetings." Uncle Sebastien was all about business anyway. If he had any family feeling, it was well hidden under layers of stuffed shirt.

"He came to the twins' christening," she said. "Suzie spit up on the shoulder of his best suit."

"Ooh. Good for Suzie." They exchanged looks reminiscent of long, tedious Sunday visits when they were supposed to be seen and not heard. "But maybe I'll skip the hellos."

"I hope you find the job you want."

"Well, much easier now than ten years ago, right? If there's not an opening there, I'm sure I'll find something good." With so many men at war, jobs were going begging. Uncle Sebastien was far from the only game in town.

"I'm sure you will." She leaned in for another hug. "Oh, it *is* good to have you home. And staying with Mother. I worry, sometimes."

"I'm here to stay," he assured her. "I'll look out for Mother."

"Uh-huh."

That could have been agreement, but he thought he heard doubt behind it. The way she looked at him seemed to reserve judgment. Which was only fair. He'd planned not to mention the elephant in the room if she didn't, but suddenly he wanted to clear the air. He took a breath and said, "So when are you going to let loose and really let me have it?"

"For what?"

He didn't figure he had to add anything.

After a moment she sighed. "I'm trying not to, you idiot. Trying hard. Because what good will it do now to yell at you for not coming home for Charlie's service?"

"It might make you feel better," he suggested softly.

She shook her head. "No. If it'd happened a year or two ago, yeah, I'd have blown your ears off your head for being a coward, but now? I'm all grown up, and I know that nothing's that simple. You had lots of acceptable reasons not to make it back here."

"And no good one. Except that . . . I couldn't do it." He wished he could explain the tangle in his chest that had left him making calls and sending funds and doing everything except getting on a train and coming home. He hadn't been able to face his mother's church and her preacher and a religious service full of inadequate words in Charlie's memory. But right now his throat was too tight to add even one more syllable of apology.

Laura said, "I won't push you. But someday, you might want to explain it to Mom."

He nodded.

She gave him a soft look. "I was here for her and half the extended family was too. She got through it all right. But she missed you. She pretended to believe all the things you said about no nonessential travel and required overtime, with the plant tooling up for war materials production. But she looked around as if she might catch sight of you, sometimes."

He said, "When did you grow up and get smart?"

"About time one of us did." She reached up and ruffled his hair. "Now go get tidy. You can't see Uncle Sebastien with your hair like that."

Half an hour later, he headed for the bus stop. He couldn't help glancing at Stefan's house as he passed it. From this distance, the faint shape of the swastika could still be made out, despite Stefan's obvious efforts at cleaning the door. The broken, boarded windows stood like two blackened eyes on either side of a bloodied nose on a boxer's losing face. The curtains in the house were all drawn, and there was no sign of life. Warren wondered if Stefan worked, and at what. Those calluses on his fingers were surely from more than digging a garden.

The bus wasn't too crowded, now that the early rush to work had passed. Warren took a seat and stretched into the aisle to ease his leg. He was long past trying to look tough when it didn't count. He gazed out the window as his hometown rolled by. There were new buildings, even since last year. Billboards he didn't remember advertised war bonds and reminded people to plant gardens and "Smash the Axis; pay your taxes." Well, those and Coca-Cola and Camels, because some things never changed. Philadelphia was geared up for war too, but it wore a more urbane face there.

Here it was front and center everywhere he looked.

When they reached the edge of town, he got off and turned in at the front gate of Uncle Sebastien's plant. Kerrington Mills assembled medical field kits for the armed forces now. The plant had doubled in size, with a new long building behind the original belt-making factory. Warren let himself in at the office, and the girl at the reception desk looked up cheerfully. "May I help you, sir?"

"Could you tell Mr. Sebastien Deroyal that his nephew Warren is here?"

"Of course." She gestured to a chair against the wall. "Is he expecting you?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

She turned to her switchboard, making a quick call that he couldn't hear, then glanced back at him. "Sir? He'll see you in about fifteen minutes. There's water in the cooler there, if you like."

He waved a hand at her. "I'm fine, thank you."

It was closer to half an hour, but eventually Uncle Sebastien came down the hall toward him. "Warren. I only have a minute. What brings you here?"

Warren accepted an over-forceful handshake and pulled up his planned speech. "Hello, sir, it's good to see you. I'm relocating, planning to live with Mother, for a while anyway. I need a local job and wondered if you might be looking for help in the plant?"

"Ah yes, your mother." Uncle Sebastien's voice dropped to a tone suitable for hospitals and grieving mothers. "Do remind her that she can count on me for anything. As for a job, well, we're always looking for workers for the production line."

Warren hid a wince. Ten hours on his feet was not a great plan. "I did the ordering and inventory for my last place. Got pretty good at scrounging unavailable parts from unlikely sources, if I do say so. I might be useful that way here."

Uncle Sebastien snapped, "I'll have nothing irregular going on here."

"Not irregular, sir. Just creative. Um, resourceful." Was that any better? "All aboveboard, I assure you."

Uncle Sebastien peered at him from under narrowed brows, but eventually said, "I can introduce you to Mr. Forrest, I suppose. He does the supplies end of things. He'll need references, of course."

"Of course." Warren patted his breast pocket where his papers lay.

"Well. Come this way, then."

As he led the way down the hall, Uncle Sebastien said, "I suppose finding a job is harder for a cripple, even in times like these."

"I doubt I'll have much difficulty," Warren said evenly. "But I'd like to be directly involved with supplying the men on the front."

"Of course. We're doing very important work. Those of us on the home front are vital cogs in the machine. I can see where it would particularly appeal to someone like you, who has no hope of joining in the real fight."

Warren managed to say, "Yes," between clenched teeth. He concentrated on keeping the sound of his steps perfectly even as he followed his uncle down the hall.

Fortunately, Forrest turned out to be a completely different sort from Uncle Sebastien. At first he eyed Warren warily, but once Uncle Sebastien had returned to his office, they quickly warmed to each other. Within twenty minutes, Warren had shared a story about tracking down a vital refrigerator fitting to a lawn sprinkler factory and buying the next lot out from under them. Mr. Forrest skimmed through his letters of recommendation, pushed them back across his desk, and declared him hired. "When can you start?"

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Done." Forrest held out his hand, a smile creasing his round cheeks. "Eight sharp. See you here, and we'll get you a badge and a bit of a desk."

"Thank you, sir."

Heading back down the hall, he almost ran into Uncle Sebastien coming out of his office. "So, Warren." Uncle Sebastien gave him a hard stare. "How did you get on with Forrest?"

"Very well, sir. He seemed to think he might have a place for me."

"Huh. That's good, I suppose. I'm sure knowing you were my nephew helped. Right?"

"I'm sure it did, sir."

"See that you live up to that. We can't have anyone here who doesn't pull their own weight, family or not. There's a war on, you know."

"I am aware," Warren said drily.

Uncle Sebastien had the grace to look a little less arrogant. "Yes, of course you are. Well, I'm glad you're back here to look after your mother, in any case. Women are not meant to live alone. It'll do her all kinds of good to have a man about the house. You must bring her to Sunday lunch with Nancy and me sometime."

"Yes, sir." He'd make a note to take a good, strong dose of Milk of Magnesia beforehand.

"Well, carry on, young man." Uncle Sebastien strode off down the hall.

Warren resisted the childish impulse to make a face at his retreating back and headed out the door.

Coming home, buoyed by the thought of his new job, he glanced toward Stefan's house as he passed, quite randomly of course. But he

stopped short at the sight of the swastika, freshly renewed to its full crimson menace on the door. "Ah, hell."

He looked around rapidly, but the street was as quiet as ever. Three houses down, a child too young for school rolled on the lawn with her dog. Across the street, Mrs. Cleveland's curtains were suspiciously crooked. But nothing else was out of place.

He hesitated, but he had his second-best suit on. He turned away and let himself into his mother's house. The place was still silent, and he assumed she'd not yet come home. He took the stairs as fast as he could, removed his good clothes and hung them, and then paused. He'd brought only one suitcase of clothes with him from Philadelphia and hadn't included his roughest garments among them. If he was going to use turpentine and paint, he'd be smart to find something else to wear. Dressed only in his undershorts and socks, he headed across the hall. The other upstairs bedroom door was shut, and he stood for a long time with his hand on the knob before pushing the door open.

Charlie's room looked as if their mother hadn't touched it since he enlisted, the day after graduation. His sporting medals hung on hooks on the wall, surrounded by pennants of his favorite teams. His bookshelf held leather bound volumes side by side with schoolbooks and dime novels. Many of them had been Warren's once. Warren stepped toward the shelf and ran his finger over the titles. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle rubbed shoulders with an account of Amundsen's polar expedition, a text on sailing, and a book of Longfellow's poetry. He half smiled at the array of titles that reflected Charlie's agile and wildly enthusiastic mind.

The tops of the books were dusty. Warren pulled out the aging volume of Longfellow, blew on the top, and opened it. The pages separated where the binding was worn. Words jumped out at him from the page.

*I see the patient mother read,
With aching heart, of wrecks that float
Disabled on those seas remote,
Or of some great heroic deed
On battle-fields, where thousands bleed
To lift one hero into fame.
Anxious she bends her graceful head
Above these chronicles of pain,
And trembles with a secret dread
Lest there among the drowned or slain
She find the one beloved name.*

Apparently some things never changed. He closed the book and reshelfed it, loosing another puff of dust that rose into his eyes, making them water and sting. He thought he should come back sometime and do a little cleaning, if Mother wasn't up to it. Later, perhaps.

For now, he was after those old clothes of his which he knew she'd hung in Charlie's closet, to be used or altered at need. He resolutely stopped looking around, strode to the closet and opened it. With steady hands, he slid Charlie's shirts and sweaters to the side. In the corner, there was an old shirt of his own, the cuffs and collar frayed. Draped over the hanger beside it was a pair of pre-war Levi's, the knees worn white and thin. Under them he found once-good black trousers that had seen better days.

The Levi's didn't fit over his hips anymore, to his dismay, but the trousers did. The shirt buttoned all right, if a little snugly. Warren told himself he'd muscled up since his college days. He closed the closet softly and strode out of the room, unreasonably aware of the little shortness of his every other step.

Down the stairs, into the kitchen for the naphtha soap and rags, out to the shed for turpentine and half a can of white paint. He didn't stop until he was standing on Stefan's porch, looking at the obscenity on the door. Only then did it occur to him that perhaps he should have waited and asked . . .

No, be damned to that. He wasn't having Stefan coming home to this. These were the true local Nazis—the young, stupid toughs who turned on a man for no reason, for the sound of his voice, the look of his face. This was the same kind of hate that had brought on all the whole, huge, sorry mess of the war. The superior race, master race, marching with their heads high, arms snapping, on the cinema newsreels. Destroying men, peoples, whole nations, for not following the Aryan plan, for being different. And now these boys were looking at an innocent man and returning the hate.

Stupid, vicious fools. He scrubbed harder. These boys were brave, weren't they, defacing a solitary man's door? Wait until they faced real Nazis, real guns. Wait until the red was blood, not paint. Would they figure it out then, what hate led to? He stopped, flexing cramped fingers, and realized he'd taken the door down to bare wood in spots.

And still a few pink lines marked the grain of the wood, resisting his efforts to remove them. He opened the white paint, mixed it up with a twig, and covered the entire door to within an inch of the frame all around. It came out pretty well, clean and fresh. He tied a rag on the doorknob as a warning of wet paint and retreated to his own porch. There was that railing of Mother's, which needed scraping first. Then the worn edge under the eaves. He kept himself busy until the paint ran out.

His mother came home as he was tidying things away. He looked up

and saw her at a distance, and at first took her for some unknown old lady, from her slow, tired steps. Then there was that moment of realization, when perception shifted and she became his mother. He hurried down the front stairs and across the sidewalk to reach for the string bag she carried. "Here. Give me that."

She smiled at him. "Thank you! I only meant to go round to the shops for a minute, but then someone said there was fresh bread out at the bakery. I haven't felt like doing my own. And I saw some nice greens at the grocer's for your dinner. But time got away from me. Did you eat anything yet?"

"No. I've been busy."

She glanced around as they went up the steps. "So I see. The place looks better already. Oh, I *am* glad you're home."

"Me too," he said.

By nightfall, he'd managed to take care of a dozen other little repairs, and he convinced his mother to make it an early evening and head to her bed, not stay up to entertain him. He kept noticing how worn she looked. Thinner, greyer. It was partly his fault. He should have come back home earlier. He should have been there for her. He'd been selfish, hoarding his pain to himself like no one else would understand.

Well, he was back now.

He was writing a shopping list for the hardware store when there was a knock on the front door. His worries for his mother had taken over his thoughts to the point where he was startled to see Stefan, standing on their stoop, his hat in his hand. "Yes?"

"I wanted to thank you," Stefan said quietly, and memory returned.

"Oh! It was nothing." He hesitated. "How did you know it was me?"

Stefan smiled wryly. "Besides the fact that you are the only person here who would think to do such a thing?" He nodded at the fresh, white porch railing. "I had a clue."

"Right."

"Anyway." Stefan hesitated. "Was there . . . something new there? On my door?"

"No. Well, just the same thing. They'd redone the swastika. Callous louts. And in broad daylight. They should have been at work, not roaming the neighborhood making trouble."

Stefan shrugged. "Perhaps they are not employed, or on a later shift? In any case, I am grateful for my clean front door. It was . . . good, to come home to a kind gesture and not an ugly one."

Warren said, "You're welcome. Would you like to come in?"

Stefan ducked his head. "I had thought, perhaps, if you were not busy, you might like to join me in that beer that I did not have for you yesterday. I

brought home a few bottles.”

Stefan’s hair was damp, as if from a bath, and the shy, eager look in his eyes made Warren feel warm. He glanced back into the house, but his mother was probably asleep by now in her room. There was no reason not to be . . . neighborly. “Let me write my mother a note.” On the back of the hardware list he scribbled, “*Gone round to a neighbor’s for a chat. Back a bit later. W.*” He set it on the little table in the hall. “There. Now lead me to the beer.”

By some kind of common agreement, they skirted the hedge and made their way back to the kitchen door. Stefan let Warren in and closed and immediately locked the door behind them. Warren sat down at the little table and stretched out his legs as Stefan went to the icebox, popped the caps off bottles of beer, and passed one over.

“I hope that is all right? Do you want a glass?”

“Nah. This is great.” Warren took a long pull at the bottle without even looking at the label. He was no snob; any beer was good beer.

Stefan drank more slowly, eyeing him over the top of the bottle.

Warren said, “So, what work do you do?” A few years ago, he wouldn’t have asked, because it hurt a man to admit to none. But now it was safe conversation again.

Stefan gave him a wry look. “I mend roads.”

“Seriously?” Warren gave him another once-over. The forearms below his rolled-up sleeves were wiry, but not what Warren would call muscular. His shoulders were nice, but not brawny. All of Stefan screamed lithe elegance, with strength perhaps, but not brute force. “That seems like a waste of your talents. I mean, you clearly know two languages very well.”

“Four,” Stefan said softly. “Five if you count German and Switzerdeutsch separately.”

“Huh?”

“We speak German in Switzerland, but there are differences. So I speak both dialects, plus French, Italian, and English. My mother was a teacher, and French and Italian are also Swiss languages. English she thought might be of use to me one day.”

“Foresighted woman, your mother.” Warren raised his beer in a little salute.

“Yes. She was.” Stefan’s voice was soft, but not sharply pained. If his mother was gone, it didn’t seem like a recent loss.

Still, Warren changed the subject. “That’s why I can’t see you building roads. I’d think a lot of places would love to get their hands on someone with your translating skills. Maybe even military intelligence. Right up their alley.”

Stefan's eyes shuttered to dullness. "I'm not so unique. There are many women, Swiss women among them, who have those skills. There are far fewer able-bodied men left who can push a barrow and shovel tar all day."

"Perhaps, but . . ." Warren stopped. The thin set to Stefan's mouth suggested he didn't want to pursue the topic. Perhaps he'd tried to enlist and for some reason been turned down. "I suppose not being an American might make it difficult. The Swiss aren't official allies, even if you're really on our side."

"Do not fool yourself." Stefan flashed him a quick look. "Oh, yes, the people of Switzerland, the man on the street, is far more against the Nazis than for them. But many do not wish to take sides, and for some—the bankers, the politicians—neutrality is exactly what it says." Stefan's faint accent thickened. "They will take gold from anyone, pass it to anyone. The ring cut from an old Polish woman's finger is no different from honest coin once it passes into their hands."

Warren took another slow mouthful. "You sound bitter."

"Maybe." Stefan visibly shrugged it off. "Well, that is the past. I'm in America now and hope one day to become American."

"You plan to stay, then?" Warren was surprised by a warm flush of pleasure.

"This is home now." Stefan emptied the rest of his bottle.

"You could speed up citizenship by enlisting," Warren said before he could stop the thought from reaching his tongue. *No! Don't do it!* He took a breath and pushed personal considerations back. "I've heard that you can get your papers pretty fast if you're serving in the armed forces."

"Ah. Well." Stefan turned his bottle loosely between his palms, then looked at Warren with a sad smile. "Perhaps it is better that you will know." He suddenly slid his chair away and knelt at Warren's side. Warren stilled, watching him, unsure what this was, although his optimistic cock began to tent his trousers at the sight of Stefan on his knees.

Stefan looked up into his eyes, breath coming faster, but when he reached out, it was for Warren's free hand. He took it and guided Warren's fingers to the back of his head. There, under the slightly damp blond strands, was a dent and lump that he hadn't noticed last time. Stefan guided his fingers along it. "I got that a few years ago," he said. "I am healed but, once in a while, I have now, um, fits. Seizures. They are brief; I may just shake, or perhaps fall, and not be able to get up, for a moment or two. I might cry out; I do not always know. They are soon over, and there is no cause for alarm. If it happens, you must ignore it. I will quickly be well again."

Warren slid his fingers over the shape of Stefan's skull, the dent almost an obscenity in the perfect roundness of bone. A flash of anger passed

through him, hot and thick. "How did it happen? Did someone do this?"

"It does not matter." Stefan rolled his head against Warren's caressing fingers and let his eyelids droop half closed. "Ah, that is nice."

"Of course it matters," Warren persisted, although the deepening voice and sleepy look were turning his own mind to other things. "Was it here? Did someone hit you because they thought you were a Nazi?"

Stefan's laugh sounded oddly close to tears. "No. It was not that. Can we stop talking?" He turned his head and nipped at Warren's thigh through his trousers. "I have other ideas." He nuzzled in against Warren's groin.

"Oh. Sure." His hold on Stefan's head developed a whole other purpose. "Yeah, there." Stefan's teeth rasped over the fabric along his sensitive length, and he shuddered. "Upstairs?"

"Yes." Stefan rose smoothly, with enviable grace, and took Warren's beer from his slack hand to set it aside. "Come."

They climbed the stairs together, but not touching, not hurrying. Somehow it felt like they had all the time in the world. Urgency thrummed through Warren's body, but his mind was lazily content, almost as if they'd already had one round. The bedroom was now familiar, the curtains already drawn, and one small lamp switched on at the bedside. Warren saw a little bottle standing in its pool of light and took a short breath. He picked it up, swirled it, and watched the oil inside slide over the glass. "Did you have plans?" His voice came out deep and rough.

"Perhaps. Although we need not do anything you do not wish for."

He set the bottle back, caught Stefan around the waist, and hauled him in for a deep, wet kiss. "Oh, I wish. Very definitely."

Stefan raised his hands to his own shirt collar, but Warren said, "Let me." He'd so rarely had this pleasure, of unwrapping a man like a gift to himself. And this was a stunning gift, all smooth skin and lean muscle and lovely jutting angles. He unbuttoned, tugged, lifted, revealing Stefan's hard chest, with small nipples shell-pink and already tight. He bent his head to get his mouth on them, licking and tugging with careful teeth until Stefan gasped and gripped his hair.

Warren knelt, familiar moves, bad leg first, and turned his attention to Stefan's waistband and fly and underwear. Stefan let him do it, looking down with a heated expression, his hands restless on Warren's head. His cock sprang free, arching out, the head fully exposed and beaded with moisture already. Warren took a small, slow lick, savoring the sweet-salt taste of him.

Stefan groaned. "No more. Or I will finish much too soon."

Warren was tempted, with the flavor on his tongue, the firm roundness under his lips. But that oil had promise, and he remembered his vow to show

Stefan just what a pleasure being the man underneath should be. Seize the day. Or the night. One never knew what tomorrow would bring. “Get on the bed, on your side.”

Stefan did as he was bidden, lying facing Warren, watching as he stripped. Warren didn’t have the patience to draw it out as a tease for long, and in any case, his almost 30-year-old desk-job body wasn’t that much of a treat. But he didn’t hurry either, removing one article at a time and laying the clothes neatly on a chair. Then he folded Stefan’s, turning away so his own back and the good side of his ass were toward the bed.

Stefan chuckled softly. “You are cruel, so far away.”

“Anticipation makes things sweeter.” He set the last item on the pile and turned back. Holy Christ, Stefan was a sight, stretched out there on his sheets, rampant and hard, his eyes shining. “So, which way round do you want us?”

Stefan looked startled. “You would, um, bend for me?”

“Sure. Love to. Or I can show you what it should be like to accept a man, without hurting.”

“I . . .” Stefan swallowed. “Yes. That.”

“Roll over, then.”

Stefan turned, face down on the bed. Warren got in beside him and tugged at him, easing Stefan onto his side instead, his back to Warren, one knee flexed and raised.

“Like this?” Stefan sounded doubtful.

“Yeah. Lots of control, and I can reach you.” Warren stroked over the fine bone of Stefan’s hip and down in front to grip his shaft with a smooth, firm pull.

Stefan gasped and bucked back, his ass thumping against Warren. “Oh! I never . . . He never . . .”

Warren added “didn’t bother to pleasure his partner” to the list of sins of the guy who took lovely, eighteen-year-old Stefan his first time. But he kept his grip gentle and slow, stroking as he thrust in small motions against smooth skin, his cock sliding along Stefan’s lower back. When he had Stefan panting and pumping into his hand for more speed, he let go. Stefan made a little disappointed sound. Warren kissed the back of his neck, then nipped his shoulder. “Trust me.” He reached for the oil.

In the lamplight, the stream of golden liquid onto his fingers ramped his arousal. He moved his slick fingers down the cleft of Stefan’s ass, over the near-invisible blond hairs there, and pressed against his opening. Stefan took a silent breath and tensed all over, tight as wire. Warren kissed his neck again and deepened his voice. “Trust me.”

“I do.” Stefan raised his knee further. Warren stroked tiny circles with

his finger, just the lightest of pressure, until he felt Stefan's buttocks unclench. Then he slid his fingertip inside. Stefan was tight, but not impossible. Warren stroked, rubbing his rim, pleased not to feel any scarring there. Once, he'd known a man . . . He set that memory aside. This was for Stefan now. He slipped his finger deeper.

For years, he'd not known about the prostate; he'd been with men on top, on bottom, knowing that occasionally bottoming became electric pleasure, but not why. He knew now though, thanks to Andre. *Thank you, mon ami.* And Stefan was going to get the benefit. He eased deeper, sliding his finger, feeling Stefan lose resistance and begin to push back, whining under his breath, seeking. Then Warren crooked his fingertip and found that rounded spot deep inside. Stefan swore and jerked violently. "What?"

"Shh." Warren shifted around so he could grip Stefan's shoulder with his other hand. "That's the pleasure spot. Your prostate. Let me introduce you." He couldn't help a little laugh. The next ten minutes were joy and torture—stroking, pressing, holding Stefan back while Warren moved that finger deep inside—as Stefan shuddered and writhed and cursed in more than one language. Warren was so hard he felt like he might come just from this. He ached to drive his way in and fuck this beautiful body now! But the one advantage to getting older was more control. He added a second finger and kept working until Stefan was begging, "Please, please, please," in a one-syllable litany of need.

Warren grabbed the oil, gave his own shaft one fast, dripping stroke, and lined up. "Now, push out while I push inside you," he said, his breath tight and catching on the words. "I'll go slow. Press against it and ease the way."

It was still a tight fit. Stefan whimpered once and stilled as Warren sank in that first inch. But then Stefan whispered, "It does not hurt. Holy God, that feels good. You stretch, yes, but no pain."

"Damned right," Warren growled against his back. He pumped his hips slowly, circling, claiming Stefan a fraction of an inch at a time. As soon as he could, he reached over again. Stefan's cock had softened, but as Warren tugged it, in time with the flex of his hips, it hardened fully in his fingers. He thrust and pulled, building depth and rhythm. It was a little awkward to reach and flex, but it was pure pleasure having Stefan so hard in his fingers, that sweet prick leaking precum, sweat-damp skin sticking and sliding, both of them short-breathed and grunting together.

He paused to roll Stefan just a little, pushing his knee up, reaching under rather than over. On his next stroke, Stefan jolted and gasped, "Ah!"

There you are. He kept the angle, kept the rhythm, driving into Stefan's tight heat to the sound of his high, gasping whimpers.

“Oh. Oh! *Oh!*” Stefan wrapped his fingers over Warren’s on his prick, moving them together on that tight length, jerking himself with Warren’s willing hand, faster, harder, as his wordless babbling lost its rhythm. “Ah. Now!”

Warren thrust into Stefan’s ass hard and deep, and Stefan spilled seed in slippery, thick pulses between their joined fingers. Warren clenched his teeth and kept moving. His own climax was building, the pressure wave cresting in his balls and cock, but he held off, held off, keeping his fucking smooth and controlled as Stefan shook and shuddered. Then he felt Stefan begin to soften, starting to come down. Warren let go of Stefan’s cock, gripped his raised thigh instead, pulled himself back almost all the way and drove home in one long exquisitely satisfying slide that had him spilling, deep inside, in a breath-stealing explosion of climax.

Warren tensed, staying buried, impossibly gripped, impossibly hot, his face pressed into the sweaty nape of Stefan’s neck. He shook, each spasm gradually becoming shorter, slower, stealing his breath less, until at last he could pay attention to something other than his prick still clasped in that silken depth. His chest was plastered against Stefan’s back, his fingers cramped on the meaty thigh he was clinging to. They were both puffing like steam engines, rocking together in little waves that faded as the storm passed. Finally, eventually, he unclamped his fingers, eased himself out, and guided Stefan’s leg down to the bed.

With gentle fingers, he rubbed at Stefan’s tender place, soothing, feeling the stickiness of drying oil and seed mingled. Stefan let out a long, long sigh that shook his whole body. “Ah. Now I know.”

“Know what?” Even he could hear the soft fondness in his voice, and he cleared his throat to school it.

“Know why some men choose that, to be underneath.”

“You liked it?”

Stefan rolled away from him and turned over to bring their faces close on the pillow. “You have ruined me for any other man.”

“I hope not,” Warren said, despite a warm glow at that thought. “I hope I showed you how good it can be.”

“Yes. That.” Stefan reached up a hand and tentatively touched Warren’s lips, rough fingertips snagging where his mouth was dry and chapped. “The way you touch me, well, even if another man could be as skilled, I cannot imagine him taking such time, such care.”

“Well, he should,” Warren said tartly, because that little touch already made him want more. He captured Stefan’s hand in his own. “You’ve only been with one man?” It was a guess, but he thought it likely.

“Yes.”

“So, there’s all kinds of sex. There’s rough and using, where the guy doesn’t much care about you as long as he takes his own pleasure. I think that’s what you’ve had.” He paused and felt more than saw the little shrug Stefan gave. “But even with a stranger, it can be good. Some men enjoy giving as much as taking. Some will touch everyone with careful, skilled hands. And then there’s sex with friends, which can be warm and kind and fun. Like we just had. Or the sex of lovers . . .” He hesitated, because he’d not yet had a man he would call more than a friend. “Which should be even better. You’ll have time to find out.”

Stefan rolled away from him and sat up with his back turned. “Ouch. Yes, I suppose it is possible.”

Warren reached a hand to touch his back. “Are you sore?”

“No. Well, my leg. Your fingers are strong.”

Warren saw a faint outline of finger-shaped red marks on the white skin of Stefan’s thigh. “God, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. It was good.” Stefan hesitated a moment, then turned to face him, smiling pleasantly. “Right now, I’m well satisfied, and hopeful that we might do this again. As friends, as you say. Yes?”

“Sure. Absolutely.” Warren sat up too, wiping his hand absently on the sheet. “I’d like that. Sharing sex with a next-door friend will be a great bonus to staying with my mother.”

“Hm.” Stefan rubbed his fingers beside Warren’s, looking down at the smears on the worn cotton.

“Sorry about the sheet,” Warren offered.

“Tomorrow I shall do laundry. I have no complaint.” Stefan stood and turned toward the pile of clothes on the chair.

Warren could feel a tension in the room. But it didn’t seem quite like the fuck-and-get-out tension he knew from strangers’ apartments and hotel rooms. Stefan passed him his own clothing in silence, but with a simple matter-of-factness that held no impatience. When they had each put on underclothes, Stefan led the way to the bathroom, and they shared the sink to wash their hands. Then Stefan ushered him out of the washroom, went back in, and closed the door, presumably for more intimate cleaning.

Warren hesitated, his clothes in hand. He could dress and go. He’d walked home a time or two far more sticky and unkempt than he felt now. But it seemed like the wrong thing to do. While he was still debating, Stefan opened the bathroom door and held it for him. “Your turn. And, before you go, would you like another beer?”

Unexpected relief shot through Warren. “Yes. I’d like that.”

They spent another hour in that small, clean kitchen, slowly finishing two beers apiece. They didn’t touch and didn’t talk about sex, but Warren

had a humming awareness of Stefan, of where his knees were under the table, of every motion of his hands. Stefan's lips around the beer bottle almost roused his need again, although he'd climaxed as hard as he ever could remember, just an hour before.

The talk was good too, though. Easy, intelligent, far reaching. Stefan had a keen eye for both American life, with its wry incongruities, and for international politics. Although Stefan was a pessimist. Warren said, "We've got Hitler on the run, finally. We're into Belgium, we've liberated Brussels, Antwerp. France has its new government. The dominoes are toppling back the other way now."

Stefan shook his head. "You cannot underestimate how difficult it will be. Yes, the Allies have taken back some ground, but once the fight gets close to German soil . . ." He frowned, looking down at the bottle in his hands. "Even though Germany must turn the lion's share of resources to the Eastern Front, against the onslaught of the Red Army, still the soldiers your Allies face are hardened in war and determined to protect the Fatherland."

"We have the upper hand now," Warren countered. "I've heard it said, by those in the know, that the war might end by Christmas."

"No. I think not. They cannot lose, you see, the politicians, the leaders of the Third Reich. They promised the German nation that the humiliating defeat, the subjugation and poverty from the Great War, would be erased. They will spend the army to the last man to achieve that. And their army has been at the business of war for five years already, long before America took the field."

"So they're tired, I bet. Ready to go home."

"Those boys we see here in America, in their uniforms, heading out to battle? They claim to be a match for any German, but they are wrong. They will take down a German veteran only as a group of children could take down a man with a gun, by piling on the bodies until he falls beneath their weight. It will be a slow, bloody business. And at the border of the true Germany . . ." He shook his head again.

Warren deliberately gulped a loud swallow and changed the subject. "Well, I got a job today. In support, so every little bit helps."

"In your uncle's factory, you said?"

"Yes. Although more out from under Uncle Sebastien's nose than with his help." He described the interview process, taking the remembered sting out of his uncle's attitude by making it funny.

Stefan chuckled, but when Warren was done with a couple of extra anecdotes about excruciating visits to his uncle and aunt's mausoleum of a house in his youth, Stefan said, "Do you think he suspects? About you?"

"That I prefer men?" Warren shook his head. "He wouldn't let me cross

the doorstep. No, he's just been a starched shirt from day one. Probably born with a bowtie around his neck and a stick up his ass."

Stefan laughed more warmly, then stood and picked up their dead soldiers, holding the necks between his fingers. "Well, I hate to say it, but I must retire. The truck picks me up for work at six thirty in the morning."

"That's too bad. Puts a limit on our evenings."

"Yes. Although, when I first came to this country from Switzerland, Aunt Elsa still had the farm. I was getting up at five thirty to milk cows back then."

"Ouch." Warren gave an exaggerated shiver. "I'll take a nice cushy office job."

"It does suit you better." Stefan reached out, barely brushing the thin skin at Warren's wrist with one work-rough finger. He set the bottles in the sink. "I will open the door."

Stefan let him out the back, into the velvet dark night. There was a waning half-moon in the sky, bright enough to navigate the mown grass of the lawn. As Warren reached the hedge, he looked back and saw the kitchen light wink out in Stefan's house. For no good reason, he lingered, watching, until the softer light behind the thick bedroom curtains also was extinguished. Feeling pleasantly tired and sated, and warm despite the cool of the September night, he turned away and walked the fifty paces to his own front door.



That night set a pattern for the next three weeks. Not every night, but more often than he would have expected, Warren found himself crossing the lawn between their houses in the evening dark, after his mother had gone to bed. He would tap on the back door, his breath coming a little faster as Stefan pulled it open, smiled, and ushered him in.

Sometimes they talked first, over a beer, or cider, and once a glass of water since Stefan had nothing else in the house. Warren wasn't sure of Stefan's finances, but didn't dare offer to pay for his share of the refreshments for fear of offending. He went and bought a crate of bottles the second week and took to bringing a pair over with him, to share.

As time went on he tentatively shared bits of his life as well, stories of his father who'd died too young from the effects of gas in the trenches in the Great War. He told Stefan about friends he missed, a few still living in Philly but most off somewhere in the fighting. He even talked a little about Charlie. A fraction of his pain eased as he shared memories of the harum-scarum boy he'd grown up with.

Stefan was a good listener, although he didn't talk about Switzerland at all and rarely said more than a word or two about his own family. Still, he shared stories of his first years in America, with rueful humor over his own errors and misunderstandings. Warren didn't push for more. Many men had painful pasts they chose not to share, especially men like the two of them. The conversations were warm and satisfying, the evenings full of a camaraderie he'd never quite had before. Then gradually their eyes would meet, pauses would lengthen, and desire would push the words aside until they climbed those stairs to Stefan's room.

As sweet as those nights were, sitting talking, with anticipation sharpening the flavor of hops and malt, he liked even more the ones when Stefan locked the door, checked the curtains, and then dragged him into a hard embrace. Stefan had kissed awkwardly at first, but he was a quick learner. Nothing went to Warren's head faster than to be pinned against the door by Stefan's hard body while Stefan's mouth opened his and plundered it. Eventually they would hurry upstairs and fall into bed, more at ease with every encounter.

The first time he persuaded Stefan to fuck him was sweet, hot comedy. Stefan put him on his hands and knees, but they didn't line up right, and then his shorter leg gave out under the force of Stefan's thrusts. They fell onto the mattress, coming apart with a tug that made both of them wince. He rolled on his side and they resumed, but Stefan's inexpert reach-around tied them in a knot. Warren was half laughing, half cursing with frustrated need by the time he got Stefan busy fucking and set his own hand to pleasure himself instead.

But the next time . . . The next time had been glorious.

September 30th was a Saturday. Stefan worked only a half day, and when the wooden-backed truck rolled up in front of his house shortly after noon, full of tired, dirty men, Warren was waiting. Stefan vaulted out of the back with an exchange of insults that sounded friendly enough. The truck rolled away, and Stefan looked at Warren. "You need something?"

With Mrs. Cleveland weeding her flowerbed across the street, Warren avoided any innuendo. "I thought perhaps you might be planning a trip to the hardware store for glass?" He gestured at the still-boarded windows. "If so, I wouldn't mind a ride. Mr. Tolliver keeps the store open until two on Saturdays."

Stefan looked at him sideways. Warren tried to appear innocent. He was pretty sure that Stefan was getting the run-around on those windows, and each time Warren looked at that punched-face front of the little house, it made his blood heat. "I need some supplies myself. Paint. A board for the eaves in the back. It'll be too big to carry on the bus."

“You have no car?” Stefan had told Warren that he’d inherited his great-aunt’s Studebaker, garaged down the street, but they hadn’t talked about what Warren had.

“Not a car, no.” When Stefan just stood there, Warren added reluctantly, “Just Charlie’s Indian Chief.” Which he hadn’t looked at, much less ridden, since coming home. He wasn’t sure he could ride a motorcycle, although Charlie had taken him on it a few times, Warren clinging on, riding pillion behind his younger brother on a seat not really meant for two. “It’s not the vehicle to carry lumber on.”

“No. I can imagine that would not work.” Stefan eventually nodded. “All right. Would you like to come in and wait while I get cleaned up?”

“Sure.” Warren followed Stefan around the house to the back. “Don’t you use your front door at all?”

“Not often.” Stefan let them in with his key.

The kitchen was warm in the midday sun, and dim behind the closed curtains. Warren was beginning to have other ideas. “Or we could just stay here.” He stepped close behind Stefan, smelling the sweat-rich scent of his skin. Funny how perspiration could smell so rank on a bus full of strangers, and so *appetizing* from a man you wanted.

Stefan moved away, turning on the water at the sink to wash his hands. “Will it keep you from dragging me to Mr. Tolliver’s store another time?”

“Am I that transparent?”

“Yes.”

Warren sighed and stepped back further. “Go get clean, sir, and we’ll brave the lion’s den.”

Stefan gave him a thin smile and headed up the stairs. Ten minutes later, they left the house, with Stefan carefully locking up, and walked down the street. Neighbors were out, busy with garden chores as fall moved on apace. Most of them waved to Warren or called a greeting. He noticed that Stefan got a cool look or a nod of the head. He bumped Stefan’s shoulder lightly with his own. “I’ll have to get Mother to throw a little neighborhood party, have everyone in. I bet your Great-Aunt Elsa wasn’t a social woman.”

Stefan shook his head. “We moved here when she sold the farm, *finally*, after she turned eighty-eight. She had a dear friend nearby, but otherwise she did not socialize. And we did not go to church.”

“Ah, yes, that would be considered quite suspicious.” Warren glanced around the gravel parking lot as they turned off the sidewalk. “Which is yours?”

“There.” Stefan pointed to a dusty black hard-top Studebaker. “The question is, will she start?”

The answer turned out to be yes, but only with some coaxing and a lot

of hand-cranking. They'd each had a go at the crank by the time the engine coughed and consented to turn over. Stefan called out the window, "Quick, Warren, jump in before she stalls."

Laughing and dusty, Warren scrambled into the passenger side, and Stefan pulled out of the lot. "I should stop for gas. I brought my coupons."

Warren glanced at the A sticker on the windshield. "Will you have enough to last you? I didn't mean to commandeer your whole ration for my trip."

"Given that I have not taken her out in a month, I think we can safely use a couple of gallons." Stefan pulled into the station and stopped at the second pump. The gas jockey was a young woman, which still caught Warren by surprise. She took the coupons, pumped their three gallons, and washed the windshield cheerfully.

As Stefan pulled out his wallet to pay her, Warren noticed that the leather billfold shook in his hands and he fumbled the money. When the woman went to get their change, he said softly, "Problem?"

Stefan didn't look at him, seeming to ignore the twitch and jump of the muscles in his forearms and, Warren noticed, in his strong thighs beneath his trousers. His jaw tightened, spasmed, relaxed. He stared out the windshield and took a short breath, then another.

Warren reached out a hand, but didn't quite touch. He wasn't sure what to do or say. After a moment he said tentatively, "Are you all right? Should I, um, drive?"

Stefan was silent.

"Can I help?"

Stefan's next breath was softer and slower. After another few seconds, the tremors died away, and he glanced at Warren. "No. A minor seizure, I think. Very small. It comes on me sometimes, like this. Almost always short. Of no consequence." He held his hands out, steady and normal as if nothing had happened, and took a deep breath. "There. Done."

"Are you sure?" It had been a brief thing, and yet seeing Stefan shaken against his will made Warren tense, angry at no one in particular, and nervous.

For a second, Stefan looked at Warren, and there was a darkness that might have been fear in his eyes, but then he smiled. "Nothing is ever sure. But the fits are rare and I do not expect another." The woman came over to Stefan's window, and he took the change from her without fumbling. "Thank you." He turned back to Warren and managed a smile. "You can drive, of course, if you are afraid."

"I'm not scared," Warren muttered, slouching in his seat. "Although I'm surprised you still have a license."

Stefan shrugged and reached for the starter. "No one has stopped me so far."

Warren was tempted to be the first, but with his bad leg for the clutch and his three whole times behind the wheel in the last ten years, he couldn't outweigh Stefan's easy confidence. He sighed. "All right."

Stefan gave him a softer look and added, "I usually feel it coming on. If I were driving, I would pull over."

This time, the car did start back up without a crank, and they made it to Tolliver's Hardware in good order. The tone of the trip took a further nosedive the moment they walked in the door. Tolliver was behind the counter, while his teenaged nephew showed a customer the selection of saw blades. Both of them looked up at the sound of the bells on the door, then looked away pointedly with similar sour expressions. The kid went back to loudly explaining the difference between tooth shapes, while Tolliver picked up a cloth and wiped the countertop.

Warren strode forward, with Stefan hanging back at his shoulder. "Hey there, Mr. Tolliver. I used up everything you sold me two weeks ago, and I'm back for more."

Tolliver looked up warily. "What can I do for you this time, Mr. Burch?"

Warren pulled out his list. "I need one piece of one-by-four, about eight feet long. A box of penny-nails. White paint, if you have it."

"I'll have to look in back for the paint. It goes out the door as fast as it comes in."

"That's all right. We'll look around a bit."

Tolliver called, "Jerry? Keep an eye on these guys while I step in back."

"Yes, sir," the boy said.

There was a stack of glass panes and reclaimed windows in the far end of the shop. Warren led the way over, pulled his paper tape out of his pocket, and knelt. "Stefan, you tip them, one at a time, and I'll measure."

Stefan said nothing, but did as he was bidden. Warren worked through the stack until he'd found a pair that were the needed dimensions. One was four panes, one six, where Stefan's old windows each had a big single glass. Still, there *was* a war on. These could be fitted in the old frames, for now. He eased them out of the stack and brought them to the counter under the kid Jerry's watchful eye. Stefan helped stand them to lean upright by the register, then went to wait by the door, looking out the shop window at the street. The light caught his hair, turning it white, and sharpened the angle of his jaw. Warren had to pull his attention away.

Tolliver came out a moment later with a can of paint. "You're in luck. We got some in. And I set the piece of one-by out front for you. I had a nine

and a six, cut down from the twelves. I gave you the nine-foot.” He glanced down at the windows. “Those too?”

“Yes, please. And the nails.”

Slowly Tolliver went to the fastener drawers and took out a box. When he came back, he leaned closer to Warren and spoke softly. “You shouldn’t hang about with the likes of *him*.”

“Why not?” Warren managed not to change his tone. “He’s doing me a favor with a ride home.”

“Maybe. But your father, may he rest, fought the Huns, and it destroyed his health. What would he say, seeing you taking the part of another Kraut, in the midst of war?” He nodded at the two waiting windows.

“Stefan Koehler is Swiss,” Warren said. “Not German. My mother’s seen his passport. And he’s been in this country for years. Switzerland is neutral. He’s my neighbor.”

Tolliver lowered his voice still more. “No insult to your mother, but she’s hardly a judge of forgeries, is she? I heard,”—he glanced at Stefan and then away, dropping to a whisper—“I heard that on her death bed, his aunt admitted the man was German, said she brought him from Germany to help on her farm. One of the orderlies at the hospital swears to it. And that orderly was at the front in 1918, so he should know a Kraut when he sees one. Hell, you just have to listen to Koehler speak.”

“They speak German in Switzerland,” Warren pointed out.

Tolliver shook his head. “Mark my words, they’re going to find out one day that he’s been spying. Planning for the invasion, no doubt. But it won’t happen, because those murdering German bastards are on the run now.”

“Why would anyone spy out here in the middle of Wisconsin?”

“We have our war industry, same as anywhere. But the war’ll be over soon. I don’t care what they’re saying about Arnhem. It’s a setback, no more.”

“He’s Swiss,” Warren repeated.

Tolliver shrugged. “That’ll be six dollars and twenty-five cents. I assume he’ll help you carry things to the car.”

“I’m sure he will.” Warren counted out his coins, one by one, onto the counter. “He’s generous and helpful that way. Including with his car.”

“That’s how they get you off guard,” Tolliver said. “You take care now, Mr. Burch.”

Warren fumed, mostly silently, all the way home and through the hour it took to remove Stefan’s old window glass, dismantle parts of the frames, and fit the new ones in. It eased him a little, when they were done, to see the front of the house fresh again, windows whole around the white door. He passed the jar of nails back to Stefan. “Just needs some paint on those

frames.”

“Yes. Perhaps later. If I offer you a beer now, will you throw it at me or drink it?”

“Huh?”

Stefan smiled. “That scowl. I lived in fear for every nail you drove.”

“I’m not mad at *you*. Damned, close-minded, intolerant . . .”

Stefan touched his shoulder. “Come inside, have a cold drink. It will be all right.”

Warren went with him to the shed, setting the hammer in its place on the tool board. “How can you be so calm about the way Tolliver talks about you?”

“What can I do?” Stefan shrugged. “Getting angry will not make me seem less of a threat. I am used to it now.”

“And that makes it better?”

“Best to let the insults pass by, I think. One can become accustomed. When someone speaks harshly of Nancy-boys, fruits, fairies, does it make you rage like this? Or have you worn that reaction off by now?”

Warren actually had to think for a moment. “I guess I’ve learned not to react, in general. If someone called *you* that, well, I’d still want to push their back teeth in.”

“So I have learned not to react to other things.” Stefan leaned closer, not touching, even here in the dim interior of the shed, with the door standing open. “Come inside, share a drink, and perhaps we can distract each other from the inequities of the world.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Warren sighed. “You’re far too self-controlled.”

“You can make me lose control.”

“And your English is too damned good; I have the college degree, and you come out with *inequities*.”

“Too pretentious?” Stefan laughed. “The Swiss are believers in the value of being a polyglot. From when I was very small, my mother would speak to me each day with a different language, in turn. At first, it was confusing, and my father thought I was stupid because I learned my native German so slowly, but then I caught up. I learned the words together in all the languages.”

“Seems like a good method.” Warren closed the shed door behind them and followed Stefan across the grass. “Your father didn’t approve?” There had been a note of strain in Stefan’s voice, and it hadn’t escaped Warren’s notice that although Stefan occasionally spoke fondly of his mother, he rarely, if ever, mentioned other family.

“No. You understand, the twenties and thirties were a hard, hard time, in Europe as well as here. We were quite poor at times. My father had a

narrow view of what made a successful man.”

“Did they fight about it?”

Stefan flashed him an odd look, but said, “My father did not take much interest.” There was clear finality in the statement. A moment later, they were inside the kitchen, and Warren was thoroughly distracted from both family history and prejudice for a long, satisfying time. Even the drinks came much, much later.



The sound of breaking glass carried through the dining room window as Warren sat at his mother’s table, enjoying her chicken and dumplings. They both looked up, startled. For a moment, Warren wasn’t even sure what he’d heard, and then another crash and laughter made it clear. He shoved his chair back from the table, ignoring his mother’s squeak as their water glasses slopped onto the white linen.

The front door was closest. Warren rushed through the house, glad that he hadn’t removed his shoes. He plunged down the front steps, his hand skimming the rail, and swung toward Stefan’s. This time he could see the three men clustered on Stefan’s stoop. One of them was all too familiar, his memory so recently refreshed. “Jerry Tolliver!” he bellowed, breaking into a run.

All three looked up. Tolliver and one of the other youths jumped from the porch to the front walk, hurrying off, but the third paused to put a last bend on the dripping red symbol on the door before stepping back. Warren cut across the grass and caught him in a tackle that even Charlie would have been proud of. They crashed to earth together, the teenager underneath.

Warren grunted as he took an elbow in the ribs. The boy struggled, cursing, shoving at him with the wet paintbrush. “Get off me, you bastard.”

“No chance.” Warren grabbed a handful of shirt, and got his other hand around the boy’s wrist.

He was outmatched though. The struggle was brief before the kid heaved Warren aside and took off running after his friends.

Warren knelt on the grass, breathing hard. Eventually he turned to look at the house. Each of the new windows had one pane smashed to a gaping hole, and the clean front door dripped red. A haze came down over Warren’s eyes, and he struggled to his feet and took off after the vandals. He ran blindly, at his best uneven speed, plowing forward. When he was suddenly jerked to a halt by a grip on his arm, he whirled and almost swung a fist. Luckily his anger cleared enough for him to recognize Officer Donovan before the blow landed.

"Here now, where's the fire?" Donovan asked.

Warren pulled free, tugging his shirt straight. "Chasing a trio of vandals for breaking windows."

"Yes?" Donovan's eyes narrowed. "Is that blood? Are you hurt?" He pointed to Warren's sleeve.

"Just paint. Dammit. On my good shirt. That's never going to come out."

"I got a report of a fight. Was anyone injured?"

"No." Warren took a slower breath. "I caught one of the bastards, but he gave me the slip. I recognized another one, though. Young Jerry Tolliver."

"Tolliver? He's not usually a troublemaker." Donovan turned. "Why don't you show me the damage and I'll make a report."

Warren led the way back toward Stefan's house, limping a little more now that the flush of anger was wearing off. His hip ached. As they got near, Stefan came towards them quickly. "Warren! Are you all right?" He slowed and added, "Officer."

"Mr. Koehler. This isn't the first time we've been called out to your place."

"No, sir," Stefan said meekly.

Warren felt his anger rebounding. "It's not Mr. Koehler's fault if someone damages his property."

"Of course not," Donovan said flatly. "Why don't you gentlemen show me what happened."

Stefan had turned out his porch light, and in the dimness the red paint looked black. The windows were shadowed, holes punched out. Donovan shone his flashlight on the damage, then sighed. "Those boys do get carried away, don't they?"

"I'd call that more than *carried away*," Warren said.

"I agree. I'll have a sharp word with young Tolliver. And the others, if he'll tell me who they were. Not likely, that. They have their code, the scallywags."

"They should be made to pay for it," Warren protested. "Clean it up. Paint, new windows, and the time to fix it. That's several dollars of damages right there."

Donovan sighed and turned to Stefan. "Do you want to press charges, Mr. Koehler?"

Stefan said quietly, "No. Not at this time."

"I didn't think so." Donovan turned to Warren. "There, sir. There's not much I can do if the gentleman won't press charges."

Warren turned on Stefan. "Why? Why won't you at least do something?"

I saw Jerry, for certain, clear as day.”

Stefan looked at Donovan instead and held out his hand. “Thank you for your time, Officer.”

There was a moment’s wait before Donovan took his handshake. “No problem, sir. That’s why I’m here.”

As if by mutual agreement, they waited until Donovan had walked off down the street before Warren turned to Stefan. He lunged and grabbed the front of Stefan’s shirt, heedless of the paint on his hand. “Why?” he demanded. “Why won’t you even try?”

Stefan looked at him, eyes shiny in the faint light of the full moon. “You saw. I asked the police chief, once, what would happen if I took someone to court for damages. That was right after D-Day. He said he did not advise it. He told me, ‘Tempers are running a bit high. Better to just let it all cool down.’ And half the policemen in town act like I’m the enemy, or at least might be.”

“But D-Day was three months ago. Someday you have to make a stand.”

Stefan reached up to Warren’s wrist and firmly disengaged his clenched fingers from his shirtfront. “Making a stand ends up with people getting hurt, or killed. One day this will be over, and life will go on. I will move, if things here have gotten too bad to stay. But I would rather not poison the well by offending the town now.” He let go of Warren’s arm and stepped back. “Thank you, though. That is twice you have come to my defense. I do appreciate it.”

Their eyes met in the moonlight. For a moment, Warren searched for the next thing to say, the reasonable path, but nothing came. Stefan gave a tiny, sad smile, turned, and went in his defaced front door.

Warren would have run after him if his hip hadn’t given a sudden, vicious twinge. Instead he stood, rubbing it. Eventually he turned back to his mother’s house. She was waiting for him in the kitchen, with his plate covered and set on the back of the stove to keep warm.

“Are you all right?” she asked worriedly. “What’s that on your arm?”

“Paint. Don’t worry.” He made the effort to sound normal, a little irritated, maybe. Not heartsick. “I’d better go clean up and change. There’s turpentine in the shed. Will you keep the food warm a bit longer?”

“Yes, of course. But what happened?”

“Another round of breakage and paint at . . . Mr. Koehler’s.” He’d almost said Stefan’s. But, although his mother knew he was becoming friends with their neighbor, he’d kept it very casual in her presence. She knew what Warren was, and nothing of her knowledge could be allowed to spill over onto Stefan.

She gave him a gentle look, though. "You like Mr. Koehler, don't you?"

"He's a good neighbor. Gave me a lift to the store, remember, when I got that board for the eaves. And he brought those potatoes from his garden. And the Brussels sprouts."

"He seems like a generous man."

"Yes."

"I should have made more effort to get to know him before now. No matter how standoffish his grandmother was."

"Great-aunt," he said offhandedly.

"Oh yes, that's right. It's such a shame that people treat him like he's one of *them*, or some kind of spy. It's downright un-American behavior."

"Exactly."

His mother patted a clean spot on his sleeve. "I tell everyone I know that he's Swiss, but you know how people are. They prefer to believe the worst."

"Yes."

"Perhaps we should have him over for a party with some of the other neighbors. Introduce him to people. That's part of the problem, you know. He's kept himself to himself, even when Mrs. Tillens died. Normally that would be fine, but these days it lets people imagine all sorts of things."

"That's a good idea." Although Warren was beginning to wonder if maybe it wasn't smart for him to be in the same room with Stefan under his mother's discerning eye.

"I could ask Sebastien to employ him at the plant," his mother mused. "Everyone knows that Sebastien would never employ a German spy. So that would put an end to that rumor."

"I'm not sure that would be a good plan. It might cause more anger than it cured." Not to mention that his mother was a bit deluded if she fancied that Uncle Sebastien would listen to such a request from her.

He was relieved when she said, "Oh, well, it was just a thought. There must be something we can do . . ." She gave his arm another pat. "Go now and see if you can get the paint off your clothes before it sets. There's a bit on your trousers too."

So there was. *Damn*. Warren controlled his tongue and just nodded.

It took the better part of half an hour to clean his hands and arm and sleeve and trousers and shirt front and damned undershirt too. By the time he had the clothing rinsed out and hanging over the bath and had changed, his fury had subsided to a quiet burn. He went into the kitchen and took his lukewarm plate. His mother called from the sitting room, "Is that warm enough, dear?"

“It’ll be fine.”

“I’ll join you in just a shake of a lamb’s tail. You go ahead and eat now.”

The stew was still good, and eating took a further edge off his black mood. If he was being honest, he could understand Stefan not wanting to turn to the law after being warned off like that by the police chief. Still, there had to be something useful they could do. Perhaps he could go to young Jerry himself and demand recompense. Or maybe Stefan needed a good dog . . .

As he was finishing his meal, his mother came into the room, her arms full of fabric.

“What’s that?”

She smiled and shook it out. On a field of dull red, a blocky, white cross stood clearly. “The Swiss flag.” She turned it to show the other side sewn the same way. “Just as well it’s a simple one. Maybe your Mr. Koehler can hang this up on his front porch. It might do some good.”

“Maybe.” He looked more closely. “Is that . . . your curtain?”

She flushed. “Well, floor-length curtains are an extravagance in these war days. Wasted fabric. I just shortened one. It’s not quite the right red, but close enough.”

“It’s lovely.” He stood and went to kiss her hair. “You’re the best mother.” Only then did his brain catch up with his ears. “Not that he’s, um, *my* Mr. Koehler in any way.”

“Perhaps not yet.” She tilted her head to look him in the eye. “But I don’t sleep well these nights, and my room looks east, to the side hedge.”

“Ah.” He could feel the heat rise in his face as he desperately tried to calculate how often and how late she might have seen him rounding that hedge.

She patted his cheek. “I don’t want to know any details. But Warren, I’ve prayed for a decade that you would find someone to care about. I gave up a few years ago praying that it would be a woman. Now all I really ask is for someone kind and trustworthy. Yes?”

He hugged her, tightly enough that she squeaked in protest. “You’re even better than the best. Thank you.”

She handed him the flag. “Why don’t you take this around and make sure he’s all right?”

“Yes. I’ll do that.”

With a twinkle in her eye that he’d missed since he came home, she said serenely, “I won’t wait up.”

He swallowed and didn’t answer that, just bundled up the flag and let himself out the door.

He resolutely didn't look at the damage to Stefan's house as he walked around back. No point in getting more riled up. When he reached the kitchen, there was a light on behind the curtain, but for several minutes he wasn't sure if Stefan was going to let him in. His knocks on the back door went unanswered. He'd turned away, about to give up, when the door opened a crack. "Yes?"

"It's me, dammit."

"I know. What do you want?"

"Let me in."

There was another long pause, but eventually Stefan drew the door open and stepped back. Warren went in past him and waited until the latch snicked shut before turning. "Are you all right?"

Stefan looked startled, as if that wasn't what he'd expected. "Yes. Fine."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For pushing." Warren crumpled the fabric in his hands. "For not understanding why you just let it happen."

"I am not a coward," Stefan said harshly.

"I never thought you were." But he had, hadn't he? Maybe? A tinge of wondering why Stefan didn't have the guts to stand up for himself?

"Sometimes fighting just make things worse."

"Right." Warren took a sharp breath. "Anyway, I have some good news and some bad news."

"May I have the good first?"

"They're kind of mixed together. It turns out that I'm not as sneaky as I thought I was, and my mother has caught on to the fact that we have a . . . relationship."

Stefan looked paler. He swallowed audibly. "What will she do?"

"Oh no, that's the good news too. She gave us her blessing, sort of, unofficially. Without wanting to know too much."

"Her blessing . . ." Stefan stared at him.

"She knows about me and she loves me." Tenderness filled Warren at the sight of Stefan's fear. "Don't worry. She wants me to be happy."

"But . . . with me?"

"You make me happy." Warren moved closer, realizing how true that was, and laid a quick kiss on Stefan's tight lips. "She won't give us away. Which will help, because we won't have to sneak around as much. You can come over to my house sometimes for an evening or a meal. It will be good."

Stefan nodded slowly. "That is . . . unexpected. Good. Yes."

“Look.” Warren shook out the flag and held it up by the corners. “She made this for you.” The white cross was bright in the lamplight. “She sewed it just tonight. I don’t know if it’ll help, but it couldn’t hurt, right?” Stefan looked alarmingly pale and shocked. Warren blundered on, “She used part of a curtain for it. Trust my mother to make do. She’s a wonder at finding what we need when we need it. Always was, even in the thirties when things were tight. Come to think of it, I probably got a bit of that talent from her. Anyway, she made this and—”

“No!” Stefan snatched the flag from his hands and threw it into the corner. “Stop!”

“What?” Warren stared at him.

Stefan bent his head, hands fisted in his own hair, tugging until Warren saw pale strands come loose. “No, no, no!”

“I don’t understand. It’s just a flag. If you think it’s a bad move, we won’t do it.”

“You’re right. You *do not* understand.” Stefan grabbed Warren’s arms above the elbows, his fingers cold as ice and tight as clamps. “I am not who you think I am.”

Warren’s brain scrambled to make connections. “Then who . . .?”

“Oh, I am Stefan Koehler. I am twenty-three years old, I have a Swiss mother, a Swiss great-aunt, a passport. All that is true. But I was born outside Munich, I lived there for eighteen years, and when the army of the Third Reich marched into Poland in 1939, I was in those ranks. I fired a gun, shot down the enemy, occupied the towns. I was there. In the uniform. Just like the men who killed your brother.”

Warren stared at him. It didn’t make sense. Images jumbled in his head, of Stefan’s blue eyes, of Charlie laughing, of faces in newsreels under peaked military caps, under menacing green helmets, cold eyes, dead eyes . . . He yanked his arms free of Stefan’s grip and stumbled back.

Stefan watched him, the lines of his jaw pulled tight with strain, his lips pressed flat. Warren backed up against the counter. Stefan stood with his arms wrapped around his stomach, curling in as if in pain. But when he finally spoke, his voice was flat and level. “So you should probably go home.”

“You were . . .” He couldn’t even say it. He swallowed. “Are . . .”

“A soldier of the *Wehrmacht*, yes. *Ein Gefreiter*. I do not know the translation.” He laughed, a short bitter bark. “Did you know, it is the same rank held by our beloved *Führer* when he served in the Great War?”

Warren just listened, shocked out of words.

“My father served in the Great War, too. Perhaps he was the one who loosed the mustard gas that poisoned your father’s lungs. My brother, he is

ten years older than me, of the rank of *Hauptmann*. He is no doubt still killing your people. That . . . That is who you have been bedding, all these weeks. That is the man your mother sewed that flag for.”

Warren tasted acid in his throat. His breath came short and shallow. “You *lied* to me. All this time.”

“You should go now.”

“Damn you.” Warren blinked hard. “I told you about Charlie, about Dad, about all my friends. And you said *nothing*.”

Stefan shrugged, almost nonchalantly, although he still hugged himself tightly as if keeping his guts from tumbling out of his body. “What was there to say? Go home, Warren.”

“Too damned right.” Warren strode past him to the door, his chest constricted in bands of iron. “Too *fucking* right. I’m gone. And to hell with you and your lies and your swastikas and your gorgeous, two-faced, lying . . .” He choked, fighting with the lock on the door. The bolt stuck, resisting his shaking hands.

Finally it yielded, sliding back. As he reached for the handle, he heard Stefan make a sound, something short, garbled, strangely thick and unclear. He wouldn’t have bothered to even glance back, but the sound was followed by the thud of something heavy hitting the floor. Against his will, he looked over his shoulder. Stefan lay sprawled on the floor, arms akimbo, head arched back, eyes rolled up, twitching in every muscle.

Serves him right! Warren tried to say that, but without thought, he found himself on his knees on the tiles, bending over Stefan.

It had to be a fit. Warren calmed his racing breath, his hands hovering over Stefan’s shaking body. He’d almost forgotten that Stefan had them. This was far worse than that moment in the car. Remembering the betrayal Stefan just confessed to, he wondered if this could be some kind of act. But no one could fake the bone-shaking tension of every inch of Stefan’s body, the drool slipping from his mouth, the acrid scent as his bladder let loose. Stefan’s arm thrashed, and Warren grabbed it to keep him from hitting himself on the table leg. The muscles were tight and vibrating like piano strings under his fingers.

He had a vague idea he was supposed to keep Stefan from swallowing his tongue, but his tight-clenched, working jaw muscles made that seem impossible. Stefan’s shaking vibrated his body against Warren’s knees, but the worst was the rolled eyes, blind white arcs under tight lids, devoid of all that was Stefan. The fit lasted an eternity of minutes, but perhaps only three or four by the clock. Slowly, the tension in the wrist Warren was holding faded. The trembling stopped. Stefan’s painfully arched neck eased, and he softened to stillness, his eyes fluttering shut and then opening to blue, fuzzy

awareness. "*Was ist passiert . . . ?*"

Warren held still. Stefan's gaze wandered, dazed and unfocused, and then at some moment he locked onto Warren's face. At first a sweet, shaky smile crossed his lips, and he said thickly, "Oh, yes, you." Then he blinked, frowned, licked at spit-slick lips, frowned again, and a look of dawning horror crossed his face. His mouth worked, tensed, then he said, "Ah, *hell!*" And burst into rough, helpless tears.

"Don't!" Warren reached for him and pulled him up, wrapping him in a hug, ignoring spit and piss and anger. All his concerns were temporarily submerged in the deep, painful sobs wracking Stefan's body, the gasps of breath, and the hot dampness against Warren's neck. For long minutes Stefan clung to him, but eventually his crying eased. Then he pushed Warren away, even though it meant he sprawled off-balance on the floor again. He wiped his mouth with a clumsy hand, staring at Warren. "You were leaving. I think . . . ?" The uncertainty, through the trailing sobs that still rattled his voice, made Warren ache.

"You were telling me things I needed to hear." He didn't move off his knees.

Stefan scrubbed his sleeve over his wet face. "I think I was finished."

"I don't." Warren made an effort to speak slowly and softly. "You were doing it on purpose, making me angry by the way you told it. I don't like being manipulated like that. And I need to hear the whole story."

Stefan pushed himself up to a sitting position with hands that still trembled uncertainly. "I am not . . . I cannot remember. Ach, I am wet, dirty. Foul. You should leave me."

"You must be joking." Warren frowned. "Do I seem like a fair-weather friend to you?"

"A what?" Stefan rubbed his hip as if it hurt.

"Someone who leaves when things get a bit rough."

"Oh. No." Stefan blinked hard. "I'm sorry. I cannot think. When it happens, after, I am like a baby in a mud puddle, all flailing and dirty and lost."

"Let me help you get found, then."

"I am disgusting. How can you not see it? You should leave now and perhaps come back tomorrow. I command you to leave."

"Prove to me you can stand on your own, and maybe I will."

Stefan's first uncoordinated attempt was laughable, if Warren had felt like laughing. The second was damned near dangerous. Warren grabbed Stefan's arm and managed to break his lurching fall. "Enough. Prove your manhood another time. For now, let me help you to bed." He wrapped that arm across his shoulders and hugged Stefan's waist.

“Bathroom first,” Stefan muttered.

“All right, but not alone.”

“I cannot fight you now.”

“Praise the pigs.” Warren guided his faltering steps. “Shall we try the stairs?”

“Slowly.”

Eventually, he got Stefan upstairs, out of his wet things, dressed in clean pajamas and into his bed. Stefan was docile and silent, his eyes drooping tiredly. Warren tucked the covers around him and then sat on the edge of the bed. “There you go.”

Stefan said, “Thank you. Very much. I am fine now.”

“The hell you are.”

“I will be soon,” Stefan mumbled. “I wish to sleep a little.”

“Go ahead,” Warren said. “I’ll be here.”

Stefan’s eyes drifted shut. He looked pale and exhausted, and Warren wasn’t surprised when his breathing eased quickly into sleep.

Such a confusing man. He’d wondered about Stefan’s past, but never came close to guessing this. And yet he was sure there was a lot more to the story than “I was a German soldier, now get out.” He watched Stefan sleep, wondering what the rest might be, pondering the future, and the past. Just as he was thinking about getting up and going in search of a book to read, Stefan said without opening his eyes, “Are you still here?”

“Yes.”

“I was afraid I had dreamed that.”

“Nope. But I’d say it’s still conditional on hearing the rest of the story, when you’re up to telling it.”

“All right.”

He thought Stefan had drifted off again, but then his voice came again, thin and quiet. “My mother went from Switzerland to Germany in 1910. She met my father, who was a young army recruit. They were married, and my brother Ernst was born the next year.”

Warren waited, but when Stefan had been silent for several moments, he prompted, “Then what happened?”

“The Great War happened. My father served honorably, but after the war he was discharged. He got a job in the building trade. He was strong and healthy. And in 1921, I was born. But the times were hard. People lost jobs, money was scarce. I was a child, but I remember days we went hungry. I recall my mother trying to feed four of us from a couple of potatoes and an onion, making a thin soup.”

“We weren’t that close to the edge,” Warren said. “Even in the hardest years, Mother had some family money. We didn’t have luxuries, but we got

by.”

“People starved.” Stefan’s drowsy voice was at odds with his words. “Workers were paid by the day, and you spent all you had, because tomorrow already the money would be worth less. I remember standing in line with my mother for hours . . . Well, that is not important.”

“It’s part of the story.”

“It is part of everyone’s story. But Hitler came to power and things seemed better. There was the feeling that Germany could rebuild, be reborn. Then one day when I was fifteen, I came home.” He swallowed, and his voice sharpened. “I was told that my mother was dead. Burned, in a kitchen accident. Too badly burned for me to even see the body.”

“Oh, Stefan.” Warren leaned toward him.

Stefan’s eyes popped back open, bright and intent, locking on Warren’s face. “It was a lie.”

“Go on, then.”

“I believed it.” Stefan closed his eyes again. “I was so sad. Ernst was my father’s favorite, already in the military with a promotion under his belt. I had been my mother’s son, and now I was no one’s. But I tried to become what my father wished. I exercised and grew strong, gave up reading, except on rare occasions. Learned to shoot my father’s old gun. And when the time came, I enlisted in the army.”

“How old were you?” Warren could picture young Stefan, bright and determined to make his father proud.

“Seventeen. I had my father’s blessing; finally he was satisfied with me. A year later, we moved to annex Poland.”

“That was an invasion,” Warren said.

“I know. Now I do. But then . . . I was eighteen. I believed that the Poles were a backward race, poor and uneducated, who could not govern themselves. They had provoked our warship, brought it upon themselves. We would share with them the benefits of the new society, the greater Germany. I did not understand why they would resist the inevitable.”

“You were what? A foot soldier?”

“Yes. We marched in. It was very fast at first, very easy. The Poles fought us, but they had nothing, no way to stand against us. Dear God, Warren, they had cavalry, while we had tanks.” Stefan winced. “We shot them down like hunting for sport, and still they came. Horses and men. I could not understand why they did not just give up.”

“And then?”

Stefan looked at him again. “I killed men on that battlefield. I shot one man dead, for certain. I know I did. He slid off his horse into the mud. His eyes were open. The horse was screaming, and I shot it too, to make it stop.”

“It was a battle,” Warren said helplessly. He’d never seen one.

Stefan nodded. “Well. We settled in to control the territory after a while. There was still fighting elsewhere, but my unit was assigned to patrol some towns we had pacified. Then Unger . . .” He bit his lip. “*Herr Feldwebel* Unger was my direct commander, several years older than me. He liked to have me assigned as his assistant when we made the patrols. He enjoyed having command, walking into any house he chose, ordering the people there to bring out what they had of food or valuables. He would say he was searching for contraband or weapons, and take what he wished.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. For a long time, I did nothing. I followed orders. Whatever he wanted from them, or from me, he should have.”

“From you? Was he . . . the one?”

“Yes. Before the war began, and after.” Stefan pushed himself more upright in the bed. “You must understand, he was not all bad. At first. The power, having people who had to obey and bow to his will in every way, it was not good for him.”

“What happened?” Because clearly something had.

“He began to also make the prettiest woman in the house show him her room, to *search* it.” Stefan’s mouth twisted. “And still I did nothing. I stood there like a log and aimed my gun at these people while Unger took the wife or the daughter behind a closed door.”

Warren wanted to hit him, and wanted to hold him. The frozen anguish on his face forbade either one. And of course, that was Stefan’s only lover, going off and raping women while he was ordered to stand by. What kind of torture had that been? He said softly, “Was he still, while this was happening, having you too?”

Stefan looked sick. “Yes.” His voice was just a breath. “Then one day, he chose this girl. She was so small, perhaps twelve. Perhaps. As he dragged her by the arm, I saw her brother go for a shotgun. I did nothing. I stood there like that same log while he shot Unger in the back.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

“The boy turned on me, but he had fired both barrels and the gun was empty. I saw him prepare to die, this boy not much older than the girl. I lowered my gun. I said, ‘Run. Out the back door. Be fast.’ My Polish was not good, but he understood. He grabbed her hand and they ran. I hurried to the front to meet the others of my unit, you understand, who had heard the shot. I told them there was a man in the upstairs of the house. I said we should burn him out. I thought a fire would hide all and distract them.”

“Did it work?”

“No. They searched the house upstairs instead and found no one and no

way out. Then one of the older men looked at Unger's body, how he lay, where the shot had gone. And he knew I lied about it coming from upstairs."

"What happened?"

"I was arrested, thrown in a cell. Questioned. I said first I did not see, I was mistaken. But they knew by then the shot came at close range from inside the house. It was clear I was still lying. Eventually, I said I let Unger die because he and I . . . Because he made me. But I would not say who held the gun."

"Stefan . . ." Warren reached out to touch him, but didn't complete the gesture. Stefan gave a small shake of his head, the words tumbling out faster now.

"I was to be further interrogated, and probably shot afterward, for aiding the enemy or my part in killing Unger, it didn't matter. I heard later that they razed the whole village to the ground and killed everyone they found there, as a warning. Perhaps the children got away first."

"But you didn't die." Was that head injury from his own people? A botched execution?

"My brother Ernst, you remember? He was higher up. Not enough to spare me, but he came to my cell. He commanded me to tell him what happened. He demanded the truth. He was my brother. Finally, I said I let an old Polish man shoot Unger because he made me bend over for him, and I could not do it anymore."

"And?"

"He beat me. He hit me until I fell and struck my head on the cot, maybe some more afterward. I do not remember well after that, but I was told . . ." Stefan swallowed. "He claimed I was dead, killed in anger because I'd said Unger was my lover. It was not regulation, but no one would care that he killed his unnatural, murderous brother. I do not know how he got away with having me declared dead. Probably he bribed someone. He was allowed to take my body, presumably to bury dishonorably. Instead, he bandaged my face, got me papers, and shipped me with an attendant as a wounded man, not home to Father, but all the way to Switzerland, to my mother."

"He did what? Wait—your mother died." Warren was confused, his hatred for Ernst suddenly short-circuited.

"I had thought. I was told. But it turned out she had an argument with my father, and he beat her. She left him, and he forbade her to have contact with me. Ernst was already adult and out of the house. He knew."

"They told you she burned to death!" Warren said, appalled.

"Yes. But she had returned to Switzerland, to her own parents, and Ernst knew a man who knew someone who got me in through France. I was

ill for weeks, and she cared for me, and slowly the fits and confusion went away and I was better.” Stefan swallowed again. In the low light, his face had a greenish cast.

Warren said, “I don’t need to hear more right now. You should rest.”

“No. Let me tell it now.” Stefan took a breath. “In any case, there is not much more. I spent several months with my mother. We read and talked and studied together, and she got me a Swiss passport. I expected to live there forever. But she caught an ailment of the stomach and died.” The tremor in his voice was brief, quickly controlled. “My grandparents, her parents, disliked me. I reminded them very much of my father. They arranged for me to come here to America, to Great-Aunt Elsa, who stubbornly clung to her farm and needed help. In those days, travel through France was still possible, and I came here by boat. And here I stay, a German soldier in your midst, but not a spy.”

Warren took Stefan’s hand, despite his quick attempt to avoid the contact. “Listen. You aren’t a soldier any more. They beat you half to death. I think that counts as a discharge.”

“Dishonorable.”

“And a good thing too,” Warren said tartly. He was rewarded by an easing of the lines around Stefan’s eyes. He squeezed his clammy hand. “You *are* Swiss, at least as much as German now. That’s not a lie, if not the full truth. And you’ll become American. We all have ancestors who came over on the boat, some of them less than savory. What counts in the good old US of A is what you do once you hit American soil. Is there any of that you’re ashamed of?”

“No.” Stefan stared at their joined hands. “Some would say this is the thing for which I should feel shame.”

“Do you?” Warren held his breath as tightly as he held Stefan’s fingers.

“No.” Stefan raised his eyes to meet Warren’s, and his gaze was steady, if tired and pained. “I regret none of it.”

“Nor do I.” Warren raised that hand to his mouth, kissed Stefan’s rough fingertips, licked one, kissed his wrist. “Not then, not now. And I want more.”

“But Charlie . . .?”

“This has nothing to do with Charlie. Or the war. For all we know, Charlie might have killed some cousin of yours on the front, or even your brother.” Stefan winced palpably, and Warren cursed his stupid words and hurried on. “That still would have nothing to do with you and me. As long as you don’t want Hitler to win this war . . .?” He paused and raised an eyebrow.

“God. No.” Stefan’s expression was guileless. “I saw Poland, and lived

in Switzerland on the edge of war, and passed through France. I know the lies we were told; I know the Third Reich brought the war on us all. But I know those men who make up Germany's armed forces. The fighting will not be over until they are totally defeated, if they can be."

"They will be," Warren said stoutly. They had to be. The tide had surely turned, recent setbacks aside. The Allies would win in Europe and, God willing, eventually in the Pacific as well. "Until then, you should live here, quietly, as Swiss. And yes, with my mother's flag flying. Doing all you can not to be a target."

"It feels dishonest."

"How would tempting those boys to arson or murder feel?"

Stefan's mouth dropped open on a short, shocked breath.

"I'm not trying to make light of it." Warren let Stefan pull his hand away. "But I've been thinking. I like the physician's motto of *first, do no harm*. The question is, which of your several truths does the least harm now to innocent people?"

He let Stefan think too, there in the quiet room. Stefan's eyelids slowly drifted closed, and Warren tried to be resigned to another period of watching him sleep. But eventually Stefan said without opening them, "Yes. You are very wise."

Warren chuckled. "I don't think I've been called that before."

"No, you are." He sat up and looked at Warren. "And you are right. This, you and me, living quietly, as you said. This is right and kind. This is perhaps the fate for which Ernst spared me."

"Well, good," Warren muttered, carefully not reaching for Stefan.

He didn't have to, because Stefan reached for him, pulling him into a rough hug and then kissing him breathless. "I thought I had to give you up for the sake of honesty," Stefan said. "And now I see that I can keep you. It is like being reborn."

Warren held him close and did some kissing of his own. "Maybe not reborn, but this, what we have, is a hell of a gift. Not one I'm going to throw away."

"A gift?" Stefan met his eyes. "Do you think some power brought us together, then? God?"

"God, power, fate, I don't really have a belief. But you're here where I need you to be. That's enough."

Stefan laid his head on Warren's shoulder, arms loose around him. "I wish I was not so tired. I would make sure you never want to leave." His breathing slowed. "This is good, though."

"Let me hold you," Warren murmured, too low to be heard. He thought of everything this young man had gone through, when he'd been barely

more than a boy, and his arms tightened protectively.

Stefan must have had sharp hearing, because he said, “You can stay as long as you like. Lie down with me? You must be tired too.”

“Yes.” Warren eased them down into the bed together, his arm across Stefan’s chest, their heads close together on one pillow. Stefan’s fine hair lifted to the puff of Warren’s breath. He should have gotten up to turn off the light, but this was too perfect to want to move.

“And now, what?” Stefan said, toward the ceiling.

“Now we live.” Warren kissed his hair and the rim of his ear. “Live, fuck, work, hope for peace.”

“A detailed plan.”

Warren was pleased to hear the thread of humor in Stefan’s tone.

“No point in planning all the details. Life always surprises you. But goals, yes. Those are worth having.”

“And you have some?”

“For now, sleep. After that, to get inside that fine ass of yours. Long term?” He thought about it. “Two confirmed bachelors can live side by side, in a friendly way. Helping each other out from time to time. Then perhaps one day, if Mother chooses to move in with her grandchildren as my sister has suggested, those men might even live together to save money. It’s still far too soon to be sure, but I think that might be a good goal.”

Stefan turned and wriggled up the bed enough to seat his chin in Warren’s hair. That lovely jaw was a bit hard and sharp, but Warren wasn’t complaining. Stefan slid his arm around Warren’s back. “That sounds nearly perfect to me,” he said.

EPILOGUE

Half a year later, Stefan and Warren sat at careful opposite ends of his mother’s couch, while Mother leaned forward in the armchair. They all stared at the radio as it warmed up, popped, and hummed to life. Words that would change the world crackled, rough but clear, relayed halfway around the globe.

“Tuesday May eighth, 1945, will be remembered in history. We have this from the BBC in London . . .

“. . . Yesterday morning at 2:41 a.m. at Headquarters, General Jodl, the representative of the German High Command, and Grand Admiral Doenitz, the designated head of the German State, signed the act of unconditional surrender of all German land, sea, and air forces in Europe . .

.”

They'd heard the news already from President Truman, who had celebrated the victory while reminding his people that the war against Japan raged on. But this was better, this speech in Churchill's rolling, powerful British voice. They listened together to the end of their personal war.

When the BBC relay was done, Mother shut off the set. Stefan looked at them both, his eyes shining. "I cannot believe the fighting in Germany is over."

Mother stood and laid a gentle hand on his head. "We're all so very thankful today."

"Yes."

She said, "I think I'll go bake something. I have a little of the fat ration left. I think we need a cake. I'll be in the kitchen for a while, baking. You'll stay and have some when it's done, Stefan?"

Warren stood and gave her a long, hard hug. "I'll see that he does." When she'd left the room, he sat down again, close alongside Stefan this time, thighs and shoulders touching. "A remarkably tactful woman, my mother."

"Yes." Stefan turned toward him, nuzzling in blindly against his neck.

Warren enveloped him in his arms and dared a small kiss, despite the half-open curtains. Any impropriety might be forgiven today. "Love you."

"And I you. More." Stefan returned the kiss softly, then sat back.

"Of course, there's still Japan," Warren pointed out.

"We will prevail. Our boys are the best," Stefan said stoutly.

Warren hid a smile of pleasure at hearing him be so staunchly American. "We sure will."

"Europe will need a generation of rebuilding, though. So much has been lost. Dear God, Hamburg, Dresden. So much time and skill will be needed to rebuild even a fraction of it."

"Do you want to go back there?" Warren kept his voice even, like mere curiosity, like this wasn't life and breath to him. "Your skills with languages would be valuable. You might do better than road building for a job. And you could look for your brother, too."

"No!" Stefan stared at him. "Hell, no. I'm an American now, and here I stay. Better employment, yes, that I would like to find. But not if it takes me away from here, or away from you."

"Good." Warren let out a deep breath.

"I do hope to discover what has happened to Ernst, one day. Perhaps even my father."

Warren thought secretly that Stefan's father was no loss if gone, but he

said, “There may be lists. After a while, as things get more organized, we can try to find out about them.”

“Yes. Maybe.” Stefan leaned in against him, staring blindly at the silent radio in the corner of the room. “I cannot believe everything is over.”

Warren tightened his arm across Stefan’s shoulder. “Everything?” he said. “Oh, my dear man, the war in Europe may be over, but *we’re* just beginning.”



About Kaje Harper

Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal, and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, and loved, in any quiet moment she had, but the stories rarely made it to paper. Her time was taken up by work in psychology, teaching, and a biomedical career, and the fun of raising children.

Eventually the kids became more independent and her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She started putting words down in print again, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested if she was going to spend that much time on the keyboard she ought to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first submission, *Life Lessons*, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has many novels and short stories published, including bestseller *The Rebuilding Year*, and a selection of free short stories and novels. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy omnivorous little white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.

Contact

Website: kajeharper.wordpress.com

Goodreads: goodreads.com/author/show/4769304.Kaje_Harper

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Coca-Cola — *The Coca-Cola Company, Atlanta, GA*

Camels — *Reynolds Innovations Inc., Winston-Salem, NC*

Vaseline — *Conopco Inc. d/b/a Unilever Co., Englewood Cliffs, NJ*

Levi's — *Levi Strauss & Co., San Francisco, CA*

Indian Chief — *Indian Motorcycle International, LLC., Medina, MN*

Studebaker — *Studebaker Motor Company, Inc., Arvada, CO*



CAROUSEL
by
Jordan L Hawk

Author's Note: "Carousel" takes place between the events of *Stormhaven* and *Necropolis*.

I.

Late on a Sunday afternoon, I sat in the study, afraid to write a letter.

It shouldn't have been such a hard task. Letters were simple things, weren't they? I wrote a handful a week: to my cousin Ruth, to friends out west, to clients. At one time I'd written faithfully to my adoptive parents back in Kansas and received their letters in return.

Two months had passed now with no word from them. Ever since Pa insisted I choose either my lover or my family.

"Griffin?" asked the man in question from his chair near the fire. "Is everything all right? You seem pensive."

I blinked out of my fog and turned my gaze away from the blank piece of paper and to him. Percival Endicott Whyborne, who turned his back on the family fortune to pursue scholarship. His dark hair stood up in short spikes, tamable only by large quantities of macassar oil, and then only temporarily. He was startlingly tall at over six feet, but his slender build gave the impression he was composed mainly of long limbs and awkward angles. Our marmalade cat, Saul, sprawled over Whyborne's lap, purring loudly enough to hear across the room.

The rest of the world, with a few exceptions, thought Whyborne my good friend and boarder, rather than my lover of almost a year. Although "lover" seemed hopelessly inadequate to encompass everything he meant to me.

He had been my rock through so much already; there was no question I could rely on him now. "I've been considering whether I should attempt to find my brothers," I said.

Whyborne's eyes grew shadowed. He knew my history. My brothers and I were adopted at separate stops on the orphan train, all contact lost ever since. "I thought you said the task would be nearly impossible."

"It will be." I toyed with the pen absently. "But thanks to my work with the Pinkertons, I know a few men who will be able to investigate in New York and out in Kansas. I was going to write a letter to one of them, to ask him to make the attempt, but . . ." I trailed off.

"But you've already lost one family," Whyborne said quietly.

"Yes." It hurt, knowing Ma and Pa no longer wanted anything to do with me, once they'd learned the truth of my relationship with Whyborne. If

I found either of my brothers, I might have to go through the same loss again with them in time. "I'm just not certain the risk is worth it, Ival."

Ordinarily, the pet name drew a smile from Whyborne. This time, he only looked uncomfortable—but his relationship with his family had never been particularly harmonious. "Griffin," he began.

A knock sounded from the front door downstairs. "I'm not expecting anyone," I said, rising to my feet.

"Neither am I," Whyborne said, a bit unnecessarily, as he wasn't social by nature. His only close friend currently made her way to Egypt, if she hadn't already arrived, and no one else ever called on him. He returned to his book, and I went downstairs to answer the door.

I didn't recognize the man on our stoop. He had a thin face and bushy beard and looked to be one of Widdershins's less affluent citizens. Although neat and clean, the elbows of his coat were worn thin, careful stitching betraying a mended rip, his hatband faded from the sun.

"Please, sir, forgive me for calling at this hour," the man said. He looked not to have slept for at least a night, his eyes baggy and reddened, his face sagging with weariness. "I'm in desperate need of your help."

II.

"Now, Mr. Dalton," I said, setting the coffee cup in front of our visitor, "this is my friend, Dr. Percival Endicott Whyborne. Do you mind if he joins us?"

As I'd predicted, Mr. Dalton—for so my unexpected caller introduced himself—let out a soft gasp, and his eyes went wide. Of course the Whyborne name would get a second notice anywhere, given his father owned one of the largest railroads in the country. But here in Widdershins, the Whybornes were far more than railroad tycoons. They were one of what Ival euphemistically referred to as the "old families" who'd helped to found the town.

Of course, they'd founded it on a base of necromancy and blackest sorcery. If the average inhabitant of the town guessed that part, though, they kept it to themselves.

"N-not at all," Dalton stammered. "It's an honor, Dr. Whyborne."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Dalton," Whyborne said with the reserved air he tended to use around strangers. He found a chair in the corner of my study and sank into it, casting me a puzzled look when Mr. Dalton turned his attention to his coffee.

Ordinarily, Whyborne knew little of my cases, other than what I could divulge without betraying my client's confidences. But he had assisted me

on several, and the story Dalton stammered out on the doorstep made me think this might be one where Whyborne's particular talents could come in useful.

I took a seat behind my desk and took out a pencil and pad of paper. "Now, Mr. Dalton, if you could repeat what brings you to my door—a bit slower, if you please."

He flushed but bobbed his head. "Yessir, Mr. Flaherty. In the summer months, I worked as a groundskeeper for Mrs. . . . Er, one of your former clients, sir." He offered me an apologetic look.

"It's of no matter. Continue."

"I heard her through the open window one day while I cut the grass beneath, saying as how you'd found something stolen from the family. It's how I knew to come to you." He took a quick sip from his coffee. "I don't have much money, but whatever I've got, it's yours. Just bring my Reggie back."

"Reggie is your son," I confirmed.

He nodded miserably. "Just a little shy of his tenth birthday, he is. I went to the police, and they went down to the carousel but didn't find anything. Said he just must have run away. But he wouldn't! He's a good boy!"

"I believe you." Whatever had happened, the man was clearly frantic with fear for his child. "How long has he been gone?"

"Since sometime last night. I came in a bit late, it being Saturday and all." No doubt he'd spent the evening at the saloon, since most laboring men only worked half days on Saturday, received their paychecks, and took them straight to the nearest bar. But perhaps my assumption wasn't fair. "The little ones have their bed in the front room, so I stopped and gave them each a kiss goodnight, then went back to where me and the missus sleep."

"And Reggie was there at the time? You're certain of it?"

Dalton nodded tiredly. "Sometime around dawn, Timothy—he's named after my dad—woke us up. Said Reggie'd left, but he hadn't come back, and Tim started to get scared. We went out, and it was just as he said—the door unlocked and Reggie gone."

Now we arrived at the strange part of the tale. "And the carousel?"

"You know it? Down at the pier?"

I glanced involuntarily at Whyborne. "Yes. We know it."

We'd spent an afternoon on the midway when my parents came to visit. They'd still thought Whyborne merely an acquaintance, delighted I'd made a friend so far above the station of my birth.

"Reggie loves the carousel. Talks about it all the time." Dalton shook his head. "Even when we didn't have the money for him to ride it, he'd go

down and just watch it go 'round. Of course it's closed now for the winter, but he said he dreamed about it. Every night. Said it called to him."

"Called to him?" Whyborne's brows drew together, and his lovely eyes narrowed.

"Yes, sir. Just a childish fancy, I'm sure. But that's where he told his brother he was going last night. Only the police didn't find him there, and now they've decided he must've run off or gotten on one of the ships or heaven only knows what." Dalton blinked rapidly. "Please, Mr. Flaherty, I'll do anything, pay anything, to get him back. I know I can't possibly afford your time, but there's got to be something I can do. Please!"

"I think you'll find my fee surprisingly affordable," I said, tearing off a scrap of paper. "How many children did you say you have?" I added casually.

"Just the two boys, as lived past birth." He looked down for a moment. "We had a girl, too, but she worked the canning factory. There was an accident."

Life hadn't gone easily for the family. But perhaps I could help change their luck. I wrote down a number and passed it to him. "My daily fee. Do you find it reasonable?"

"Yes, sir," Dalton said, seeming a little bewildered. "But are you sure this is right?"

"Quite sure." I rose to my feet. "Now, Mr. Dalton, our first task is to return to your apartment. I'd like to speak with your wife and son. From there, we'll start our search." I paused by his chair and put a hand to his shoulder. "I swear to you, we won't rest until we've discovered your son's fate."

III.

Although it didn't snow as often in Widdershins as in other parts of New England, a thin layer of white covered the ground today, turning to slush on the sidewalks and roads. On the way to the tenement, I ducked into the nearest grocery, emerging a few minutes later with a bag of taffy.

"What is that for?" Whyborne asked.

"A little trick I picked up with the Pinkertons," I said evasively. Dalton seemed impressed, Whyborne less so.

As Dalton said, the family lived in a small, two-room apartment on the third floor. The smells of cooking cabbage and garlic saturated the air, accompanied with the usual whiff of sweat and piss indicating too many people living in too small a space. Still, the Daltons must have been doing well compared to their neighbors, to have only four people in two rooms and

no boarders.

We stepped around a man slouched unmoving on the stairwell. "Is he all right?" Whyborne asked in alarm. "Should we do something?"

I suppressed a sigh and caught his sleeve. If we stopped to help every wretch in this place, we'd never find Reggie. "Come along."

The stair let out onto a narrow, dark hallway. A very young boy stood in a doorway, wearing only a ragged shirt. He stared at us with huge eyes as we passed by. Whyborne stared back, aghast. Even though he'd left his family's High Street mansion a decade ago, his exposure to the harsher side of life remained distinctly limited.

It could be useful, at times, I had to admit. But this afternoon I had no wish for him to play the rube or distract from the investigation. Tugging on his sleeve again, I whispered, "Don't look so horrified. These people have pride, no different than anyone else."

We passed by a door, behind which a couple shouted at each other in Gaelic. If I'd ever known the mother tongue, I'd left it behind in New York when I'd boarded the orphan train with my brothers.

Dalton opened the next door down. "Maddie, Tim, we've got company."

We stepped inside after him. The tiny outer room contained a worn bed lounge, two chairs, a large washtub, an iron stove, and a table serving the purpose of both desk and dining table. Although crowded, everything was neatly arranged and the floor scrubbed to a standard of cleanliness seldom seen in such surroundings.

A woman and boy sat on the bed lounge. Mrs. Dalton appeared much younger than her husband, her clothing worn but carefully mended. Her son snuggled tight under her arm, his freckled face drawn with misery.

Dalton gestured to us. "This is Mr. Griffin Flaherty, the detective," he said. Then, with an air of pride, he continued, "And his friend, Dr. Whyborne." He nodded significantly enough that I put him and his wife to be at least second-generation natives of Widdershins. Long enough to know the old families, anyway.

"Oh!" Mrs. Dalton leapt to her feet, hands fluttering in front of her chest. "Dr. Whyborne! Th-thank you for coming. Did you hear, Timothy? We'll surely have Reggie back now!"

To Whyborne's credit, he concealed any dismay he might have felt over her confidence. Instead, he drew upon the manners his upbringing had instilled in him. "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Dalton. You have a lovely home."

She blushed. I was used to seeing women fall hopelessly in love with him, and marked down one more conquest. "Thank you, sir. I'm sure it's not

what you're used to, but . . ."

"It shows the care you've put into making it a home for your family," he said diplomatically.

Tears welled in her eyes. "Oh . . . my poor Reggie, do you really think you can find him?"

Dalton put an arm around his wife's shoulders, his own eyes on the lounge bed, where Timothy sat alone. No doubt he imagined two other children there: the dead daughter and missing son.

Dalton obviously loved his children deeply. But would he still love Reggie a decade from now, if the boy failed to grow as he wished? If his son one day fell in love with another man, would Dalton at least try to understand, or would he regret even asking me to save the boy now?

I forced myself to relax. This case had nothing to do with me, with Pa. The future would hold nothing for Reggie at all, whether of hope or despair, if we couldn't find him.

"We will do our best," I said. "And to that end, we'd like to speak with Timothy. Alone, if at all possible."

"Whatever you need," Dalton said. "Me and the missus will go into the back room."

Mrs. Dalton turned to her remaining son. "Tim, be a good boy, and answer Dr. Whyborne and Mr. Flaherty's questions. Just as truthfully as you would Father Luke, d'you hear me?"

Timothy nodded, but he looked far less than happy about being left with us. He jumped slightly when his parents closed the door between the rooms.

I glanced at Whyborne, but he regarded the child as he might some alien species of fish dredged up from the bottom of the ocean. So I went and sat down beside the boy on the bed lounge. Taking out the bag of taffy from my pocket, I popped a piece in my mouth and began to chew on it. Tim followed my action with greedy eyes.

"Would you like a piece?" I offered.

Naturally the answer was yes, and a few seconds later he was happily chewing as well. We went through a second piece each without any questions on my part, and he seemed to relax.

"Your brother is older than you, isn't he?" I asked conversationally.

Timothy flinched. "Yes, sir."

"I bet he's bossy."

The boy smothered a giggle, no doubt surprised to hear an adult say such a thing. "He won't let me play with the wooden train he got for Christmas." Timothy pointed at the object in question, which sat abandoned near the stove. "He says I'd break it, but I wouldn't!"

I shook my head sadly. "And of course he won't listen when you tell him."

"No." Timothy's face fell. "But I . . . I miss him anyway."

"I know you do." I focused on the taffy bag instead of him. "You saw him leave, didn't you?"

"Yes." The level of misery in the boy's voice made my heart ache.

"And he was gone a while before you told your parents. Because he's bossy, and he ordered you to stay quiet."

It was a guess, but not a wild one, and I wasn't terribly surprised when Timothy whispered, "Yes."

"I understand," I said sympathetically. I didn't, not really, because I had almost no memory of my own brothers. But I'd seen the dynamic play out many times. "I know you've told your parents what happened already, Tim. But could you tell Dr. Whyborne and me, too?"

Timothy huddled closer to me. "He . . . he ain't going to do surgery on me, is he?"

No wonder the poor boy seemed frightened of us. "Whyborne isn't that sort of doctor."

"I'm a comparative philologist," Whyborne said. Probably he meant it to be reassuring, but Timothy looked slightly alarmed at the unfamiliar words.

"I . . . All right." The boy's gaze turned to me. "The cold woke me up, because Reggie and I usually keep each other warm. I sat up and saw him standing near the door. He said . . . he said he was going to go ride the carousel."

"And he'd dreamed about doing so before?" I asked.

"Yes. Just about every night for the last week. Went on and on about it, even when we was out looking for work. We're good bootblacks, sir, the best," he added with a glance at our shoes.

"The dreams," I prompted.

Timothy bit his lip and rocked back and forth on the edge of the bed. "He . . . he said he rode around and around on the carousel at the pier." I had to strain to hear Timothy's trembling voice even from right beside him on the bed. "I asked wasn't it closed, and he said not for him. The friendly old man let him on. Said it seemed so real, he thought maybe he was actually there. I told him he was crazy, he never left the bed."

"But he did last night."

Timothy shivered. "Yes, sir. He said he was done being a bootblack and eating potatoes all the time. The old man had come to take him away for real, and he would have fun and ride the carousel forever. And then the door opened—"

“Wait,” I said. “The door opened? Or Reggie opened it?”

Timothy shuddered. “It opened by itself,” he said in a low whisper. “His hands weren’t anywhere near it.”

“I believe you. What happened next?”

“I saw a kind of . . . of light. Like a ball of fire, only it had a blue glow and wasn’t too awful bright. Just floating there in the air, without a wick or a lamp or nothing. And Reggie said not to tell anyone, ever, and hurried out after it. It went off toward the stair, and he just followed, without taking anything with him.” Timothy’s shoulders heaved, and he let out a little, gasping sob. “I should’ve called for help or something. But I was scared maybe the light would come for me, too, and—and—now Reggie’s gone and I ain’t never going to see him again.”

I put my arm around the thin shoulders. The child sobbed against my coat. “You will,” I said. “Don’t give up hope.”

“But what if he’s cold and afraid and alone?”

The chill bite of the wind, rushing unfettered over the plains, came back to me with sudden force. Standing on the train platform in a tiny Kansas hamlet while strangers looked over me and the other orphans and selected which they wanted, like buyers at an auction. A coat too big for me had kept out most of the cold, the sleeves long enough to protect my hands from the wind.

One of my older brothers had given it to me, to keep me warm. I’d never seen him again. I couldn’t even remember what happened to the coat. Probably Ma gave it away to some more needy family, or else cut it apart and used it to mend other clothes, or for rags.

“We’ll find him.” The promise was as much to myself as to Timothy.

The boy nodded and sniffled, wiping his eyes. “You won’t tell Dad I cried, will you? He says it ain’t manly to cry.”

Whyborne flinched slightly. We all had our own wounds. “I won’t tell anyone,” I said. “But can you tell us anything at all about the old man?”

“Reggie’d seen him before, in his dreams. Said he’s the one as took him to the carousel every night.” Timothy frowned as he scrubbed at his reddened eyes with his sleeve. “But there weren’t no man in the hall, sir. Just the light.”

“I believe you, Timothy.” I patted his shoulder. “You’ve been very helpful. Can you fetch your parents now?”

IV.

“What is your opinion, my dear?” I asked a short time later, as we stood at the entrance to the pier.

The bandstand lay empty and the shooting galleries dark. The sun had set on the short winter day, leaving us with only the light of our lanterns. The summer afternoon we'd spent here felt a lifetime away.

A line formed between Whyborne's dark brows as he studied the silent pier. The winter days were short, and the last light of the sun caught in his spiky hair, revealing threads of gold and copper amidst the locks. "The carousel struck me as . . . eerie . . . when we visited here before. But you didn't notice it, and you had a much closer look."

I'd ridden on a wooden horse, alongside Pa and Cousin Ruth, while Whyborne remained behind to keep Ma company. "I didn't, but I'm not as sensitive to certain things," I said carefully.

In other words, I wasn't a sorcerer. But Whyborne hated the term, and I didn't wish an argument over something so petty at the moment.

He shook his head. "Truthfully, I thought it my imagination at the time. But the missing boy's reoccurring dreams, accompanied by promises of being taken away from ordinary life to something far more magical . . ."

"It sounds like a fairytale."

"The sort which ends with a witch and a cauldron," Whyborne agreed. "The blue light that led the child away . . . Well, the brother could have dreamed it, but I suspect we could be dealing with sorcery."

I wanted to argue the boy might have simply run away. Or been lured by an old man with evil, but non-magical, intentions. But a glance at Whyborne's solemn expression stilled my tongue.

I'd seen him summon fire from the air, call down the wind from the very heavens, move water with nothing but his will. The ease with which these things came to him, the carelessness with which he treated forces that ought to be handled like lit dynamite, kept me lying awake at night.

But I couldn't argue with his expertise. If he suspected sorcery . . . Well, we'd make certain of it, to be thorough. It didn't lessen the fact I trusted him to know.

"Shall we inspect the carousel?" I asked. "The police will have taken a look, but perhaps you'll notice something they missed."

In August, the brass poles and painted animals of the carousel had been visible at a distance. Now, wooden shutters enclosed the entire structure, shielding the interior from the harshness of the winter weather.

"How are we to get in?" Whyborne asked.

I didn't reply immediately, instead angling the beam of my lantern to fall across the snow. What must have been nearly pristine white this morning was now a churned muck of footprints. The police had tramped about everywhere, destroying any evidence of prints which might have shown us for certain whether the boy even set foot here.

I led the way around the structure, inspecting the wide wooden planks used to shutter it for the winter. As I'd hoped, one stood slightly ajar where the police failed to secure it after checking inside.

"Help me move this." I put the lantern down, and Whyborne and I wrestled the plank aside. Taking the lantern back up, I stepped in, and he followed.

In the bright sun, surrounded by a laughing crowd, the carousel animals had struck me as wonderfully lifelike works of art. Here in the cold dark, they seemed sinister. Horses flung back their heads, mouths wide in frozen panic. The teeth of a tiger gleamed menacingly. Even the delicate swan seemed to watch me with black eyes.

God in heaven, the things were lifelike. I could trace individual hairs in the manes of the horses, and the swans seemed almost ready to spread their wings and fly away. As we passed by the tiger, I would have sworn I felt the touch of hot breath against my face.

Nerves, surely. "Do you sense anything amiss?"

Whyborne unshuttered his lantern and walked slowly through the carousel. Eventually he stopped beside one of the horses, an armored charger with flaring red nostrils. Tugging off his glove, he laid his bare hand on its wooden neck.

I forced myself to be patient. After what seemed like several minutes, he withdrew his hand. "There's . . . I'm not sure how to describe it. Like a vibration, almost, except it isn't the wood vibrating."

"What do you mean?"

Whyborne pressed his ear to the carousel horse. "There's a voice."

The air seemed to grow colder—or perhaps it was my blood. "A voice?"

"Come listen."

My feet felt glued to the wooden platform. I lifted them anyway, taking one step and then the next, until I stood by him. The sound could have been anything—the pounding of the sea waves, perhaps, sending a vibration through the machinery and into the carved animals.

I mimicked his position, placing my ear against the wood, so close to him I felt his breath against my face, steaming in the icy air. My impression of the lifelike detail grew—I would have sworn I could feel the roughness of a horse's hairy coat on my ear. But surely it was only the marks left behind by the chisel.

I closed my eyes, blocking out all distraction. Whispers. A constant, murmuring whisper in what sounded like the voice of a young girl.

I swallowed against my dry throat. "Can you make out the words?" My own words came out as a whisper as well, although who I couldn't say who I

feared might overhear.

“No.”

Perhaps that was kinder. I drew away. “All right, we . . .”

The words in my throat died. When we’d climbed aboard the carousel, the animals had all been facing straight ahead in their courses.

Now every one of them stared directly at us.

Neither of us spoke, only grabbed one another’s hand and ran for the exit. My foot skidded, and I slid toward one of the horses. I twisted wildly, sending a bolt of pain up my leg and back, but the pain barely registered beside my desire not to touch the accursed things.

Whyborne’s steady hold kept me on my feet. As we leapt from the platform, he let out a startled cry. I pulled hard on his hand, expecting something had caught hold of him. But there was no resistance, and we ended up sprawled in the snow together, his long body on top of mine.

“Are you all right?” I gripped him tightly.

“Yes. I think so.” A shudder went through him. He scrambled to his feet, as if loath to have the opening to the carousel at his back.

I stood up as well, a bit more slowly, the muscle I’d pulled twinging in protest. “I’d say sorcery is definitely involved.” I strove to keep my tone light, but a note of fear trembled beneath the words anyway. “Why did you cry out?”

“A light.” He kept his eyes fixed warily on the carousel, as if expecting the animals to tear loose from their poles and follow us. “I spotted a light as we jumped.”

“In which direction?”

He pointed. I noted it, then tugged at his sleeve. “I don’t like turning my back on this either, but we don’t have a choice.”

We left the carousel behind, moving in the direction he’d indicated. A low wall and gate lay just past the next row of entertainments. A sign on the gate advised us there was no admittance to the public beyond this point. As soon as we slipped through, I caught sight of the light myself.

“A lantern,” I said. “Someone else must be here. Quick, shutter your light in case they’ve a lookout.”

We plunged into darkness. I stood still for a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The full moon peered between the clouds, its eerie light reflecting on the thin layer of snow, making it far easier to navigate than it would have been otherwise.

We crept closer to the building showing the light. It appeared to be a workshop of some kind, the windows set high to let in sunlight without being blocked by machinery or tools. Too high, in this case, to see in easily.

I cast about, but of course no convenient crate or ladder lay there for my

use. If magic was involved, I wanted a look inside before we burst through the door. Even more so if the light proved to belong to some hapless worker innocent of any wrongdoing.

I drew close to Whyborne. "I want to look inside. Go down on your knees so I can climb on your shoulders."

He looked slightly alarmed at the prospect, but only murmured, "I'd prefer the usual reason you have me go down on my knees."

When we'd met, he would never have thought to make such a joke. I shot him a grin in return. "I'll keep it in mind for later."

Once he took up position, I scrambled onto his back, wincing as my boots left marks on his coat. My perch wasn't a steady one; Whyborne might have been a good deal taller than me, but he wasn't the most physically active of men. Even so, it gave me just the extra inches I needed to peer inside.

The building indeed housed a workshop. Darkness shrouded most of the interior, and canvas tarps covered whatever equipment wasn't needed over the winter months. Oddly, a pair of jointed automata, the size and likeness of men, slumped uncovered against the wall. What exhibit or entertainment they were meant for, I couldn't guess.

An uncovered workbench stocked with tools and paint lurked on the opposite side of the room from the window. Closer at hand stood an old man working on what was clearly a carousel horse in progress. Its outline remained rough, but under the wood chisel in his hand, the startling, lifelike details began to emerge. The tool gleamed with a bluish light, and for a moment I thought it a trick of the window glass.

But no—although the consistency of a soft fog, the light swirled with a strange air of sentience. Strands caressed the wood around the chisel, bloomed from a tighter funnel of light, the opposite end of which sank parasitical roots into a small body. A boy lay on the floor like a discarded heap of clothes, his eyes closed and his face almost as white as the snow outside. A chalk circle, inscribed with sigils and lit with black candles, surrounded him.

I sprang from Whyborne's shoulders. He let out a startled grunt, but I was already at the door, my revolver in hand. The door was locked, but I opened it with a single hard kick, sending it crashing back against the workshop wall.

"Stop!" I shouted, leveling the revolver at the old carver. "Whatever you're doing to the boy, cease it immediately!"

The old man stepped back from the carving and turned on me a look of anger and impatience. "Get out of here!" he barked. "You don't understand."

Whyborne stood just behind me. "I've read about such spells," he said

in a tone of horror. “They’re used to drain vitality and prolong the life of the sorcerer past its natural span.”

The old carver let out a creaking laugh. “Life? What life lasts half as long as art?”

The devil? Had he lost his mind?

Whyborne clutched my shoulder. “Griffin—the carousel animals—this is why they’re so uncannily realistic. Why they . . .”

Why they moved when we weren’t looking. Every hair stood up on my neck.

“My first creations weren’t as lovely.” The carver stroked the mane of his latest project with a loving, skeletal finger. “Dull, clumsy.” His gray beard split, revealing yellowed teeth. “But I learned the secret.”

“Killing children?” I spat.

“They just fall asleep, that’s all.” The old man gestured almost tenderly toward Reggie’s prone form. “And then they ride the carousel forever. Just as they always wanted.”

God! My hand shook with horror and the need to put a bullet through his brain. But if I killed him, what would become of the boy? “Reverse what you’ve done to him. Now.”

The carver barely looked at us, so involved was he in his project. “I can’t. So you should just let me finish.”

Whyborne cleared his throat. “As long as Reggie hasn’t been drained to the point of death, he should recover whatever energy he’s lost, just as he would blood from a wound.”

Anger flashed across the aged face. “I don’t know who you are, but you’ve made a mistake coming here. The carousel wasn’t my first creation, and I’ve worked with more than children!”

A low scraping sound came from behind us. I risked a look and saw the automata beginning to stir.

V.

They rose slowly, jerkily, like giant marionettes but without strings to pull. Their faces, frozen in joyful smiles, turned slowly to us.

I fired, sending wood chips flying everywhere. The automaton I’d shot didn’t seem to notice.

“Griffin!” Whyborne cried.

I spun around in time to see the carver lunging toward us with the chisel upraised like a weapon. Acting on instinct, I fired a second time. He proved far more vulnerable to the bullet than his creation. The chisel fell to the ground, and he went to his knees before collapsing altogether.

To my dismay, whatever magic infused the automata seemed to operate independently of the sorcerer's life, because they continued to stagger forward, arms raised to grasp us.

"I'll draw them off," Whyborne said. "You save the boy."

Before I could object, he snatched up a can of mineral spirits from the workbench. "Here, over here!" he shouted. "It's me you want!"

His cries seemed to gather their attention, because they both turned toward him. They moved quite a bit faster now than at first, like men who'd woken from a long sleep and shaken the blood back into their limbs.

Whyborne ran out the workshop door, the unholy creatures following behind.

Damn it! I wanted to rush after him, but he was right—Reggie had to be my priority. I ran to the child, scuffing the chalk circle and kicking over one of the candles for good measure. The blue glow vanished.

Dropping to my knees, I pressed my finger to the boy's neck. Although his skin felt chilled, his pulse beat strong.

I couldn't leave him here, even with the old carver dead. What if something else came to life? Cursing silently, I stripped off my coat and bundled it around him before heaving his limp body over my shoulder. A small hand ax on the workbench caught my eye, and I snatched it up before leaving.

The tracks of Whyborne and his pursuers led straight to the gate to the midway. I ran to one of the deserted stalls, laying Reggie down behind the counter where he'd be concealed from any casual glance. Then, steeling myself, I ran for the carousel.

The light of Whyborne's lantern flickered through the open shutter. Gripping the ax tightly, I plunged inside.

A wooden hand grasped my arm in an implacable grip, spinning me around and into one of the horses. I shouted and chopped wildly, not certain if I meant to strike the hand gripping me or the horse. The blade bit into nothing but air.

"Griffin!" Whyborne cried.

The automaton loomed over me, its smiling face horrible in its immobile joy. I swung the ax again, bringing it down hard on its wrist this time. There came a solid *thunk*, but its grip didn't slacken.

Blast!

I kicked one of its jointed knees as hard as I could. It stumbled, but instead of letting go, it reached for my ax with its other hand.

Then Whyborne was there, bashing at it with the can of mineral spirits. I reapplied my ax, and a moment later its hand came off altogether.

And remained clutching my arm.

“You weren’t supposed to follow me!” Whyborne exclaimed, dragging us away from the automaton. We darted through the maze of horses and swans, putting as many obstacles between us and the murderous things as possible.

“I could hardly let you face these alone.” Curse it, did he really think I’d abandon him so?

“I appreciate the sentiment, but, well—stand back!” He tore the cap from the can of mineral spirits and splashed both of the automata closing in on us, then hurled the entire can at the scene panels in the center of the structure.

“We’ll have to get past the automata to the entrance,” he warned. Speaking a word, he called fire into being from nothingness.

The can of mineral spirits exploded, hurling fragments of tin in every direction. I flung myself down, dragging him with me. “Are you insane?” I demanded.

“I didn’t think it would do that!” he protested. And he wondered why I considered his dabbling in sorcery a horrible danger.

Flames roared through the carousel. In the flickering, leaping light, the carved animals had again shifted without my noticing, their painted eyes fixed on the two of us. Those between the automata and us had extended their legs to the fullest, as if they sought to gallop away—or to obstruct the smiling wooden horrors.

I could hear the whispers now even without pressing my ear to the carved animals. Only now the sounds were the screams of horses, the haunting cries of swans, the final roar of a tiger.

The carved animals had hampered the automata, but now they were almost on us. I hauled Whyborne up and ran, ducking and weaving between the charging horses and prancing giraffes, the snarling tigers and fluttering swans. Black smoke boiled from the growing fire, and I yanked the edge of my suit coat across my mouth, struggling to breathe.

The mineral spirits coating the automata went up from the heat of the flames, transforming them into a pair of torches. Their arms flailed like those of burning men, but no sound escaped them. The paint on their faces began to bubble, but their carven lips still turned upward into smiles.

I dragged Whyborne through the roiling smoke in the direction I hoped led to the exit. A few seconds later, we tumbled out into the clear air and snow. I coughed and spat out phlegm black from the soot. As I stood, the wooden hand still gripping my arm began to slacken . . . then slowly fell away altogether.

“Fire cleanses,” Whyborne said, his voice rough. He gazed solemnly at the burning carousel, as if at a funeral pyre. And perhaps, in a way, it was.

"If any consciousness remained trapped in the carvings . . . Well, they will be free now. It wouldn't hurt to set the workshop on fire as well, before we go."

We walked back to the workshop, hand in hand. Whyborne let out a soft gasp when he reached the door. The old carver's body lay curled on the floor, a desiccated husk like the shed skin of some insectile thing.

I upended an entire can of mineral spirits on it, just to be sure, and we left the workshop in flames behind us.

A column of dark smoke already filled the night sky from the direction of the carousel. "We should hurry, before the fire companies arrive," I remarked.

"We do seem to find ourselves saying that rather frequently," Whyborne replied.

"It can be our motto. We'll have it worked on a heraldic shield. I imagine it sounds far better in Latin."

He snorted and took my hand. "Come on. Let's return Reggie to his family."

VI.

By the time we reached the Daltons' apartment, Reggie revived enough to speak.

"No, stop," he mumbled as we reached his family's door.

"It's all right," I said as Whyborne knocked. His body felt so small in my arms. "The old man is gone."

Reggie frowned up at me in confusion. "I had a dream . . ."

"That's all it was. Time to wake up."

His parents and brother flung their arms about him, weeping with joy. Then Mrs. Dalton embraced Whyborne, swearing eternal gratitude. It was everything I could do not to laugh aloud at the look on his face.

When we left, Timothy and Reggie curled together on their bed, the wooden train across both their laps. Reggie leaned groggily against his younger brother, who held him tight, as if having failed once, he meant to keep away all the bad things in the world from now on.

"A good day's work," I said as we let ourselves into the house. Saul ran inside after us and went to investigate his food bowl.

"To be finished with a good bath, I hope," Whyborne replied, brushing at the soot stains on his coat.

"Most certainly."

Our house had running water, but wasn't quite new enough to have a dedicated bathing room. After locking up and drawing the curtains, we

fetches the tin bathtub and carries it into the kitchen. I connected a pair of hoses to the hot and cold taps at the sink and used them to fill the tub while Whyborne gathered towels, soap, sponge, and shampoo paste.

When I'd bought the house, I'd purchased only the standard sized tub. But after Whyborne moved in, we'd agreed the larger tub was worth the cost of five dollars. So I stripped off my sooty clothing and set it aside with some anticipation.

Whyborne returned just as I shut off the taps. His face lit with an appreciative smile upon seeing me naked.

"Shall I scrub your back?" I offered.

"To begin with," he agreed.

I climbed into the steaming water, grateful for its warmth. Whyborne undressed, shivering a bit in the chilly air. I had been with men society would declare more handsome, yet something about him stirred me from the first moment I saw him, all long limbs and spiky hair, his eyes beautiful even given his tendency to squint.

Not to suggest his eyes were the only unusually attractive portion of his anatomy. But I'd not seen the other until after I'd already lost my heart to him.

He climbed into the bath with me, the water rising dangerously close to the lip as he settled between my legs, his back against my chest.

The touch of his bare skin seldom failed to bring my cock to attention, and tonight proved no exception. I lathered up the sponge and ran it over his chest, pausing to toy with the nipples. He made a soft sound of pleasure and tipped his head back for a kiss.

"You worried me," I murmured against his lips. "When you ran off with those awful things after you. I was terrified I wouldn't get to you in time."

"I had a plan," he protested.

"I didn't mean it as a criticism, my dear." I kissed him again, the sponge dipping lower. "Without your bravery, things would have gone very differently tonight."

"I'm not the brave one," he said.

I nipped the nape of his neck lightly with my teeth, making him yelp. "You helped a great deal with my investigation," I murmured against his skin. "It's only fair you get your reward."

He flashed me a heated look over his shoulder. "Then give it to me."

I abandoned the sponge and explored lower with my fingers. His cock poked up eagerly to meet my touch. I rubbed the head, drew a groan from him. "Get on your knees."

He obeyed immediately, bracing himself on the sides of the tub. I rose onto my knees as well. His crease was slippery from the soap, so I pressed

my cock between his buttocks even as I wrapped my fingers around his erection.

I drew a moan from him, and he pushed back against me. I kissed his back, my prick sliding deliciously in the cleft of his ass. His cock was hard in my hand, and I tugged him in time with my movements.

He grunted my name, helpless with lust. I closed my eyes, breathing deep of his scent, like a fresh sea breeze. Everything I needed was here in my arms: his body, his passion, *him*. He was home, as truly as any home I'd ever known, and the moments of peril only made those of peace all the sweeter.

"Griffin, please, faster," he begged, and I complied. I rubbed against him, his buttocks tight, my cock sliding across his hole and making him gasp. His prick stiffened further in my grip—then he bucked against me, body shaking as he cried out, spilling over my fingers and into the bath.

The sweet friction against my prick, combined with his climax, drove me over the edge a moment later. I let go of his cock, gripped his hips, and rutted hard against him until I shook and moaned and came.

Boneless, I collapsed back into the tub, sending water splashing over the sides. At the moment, I couldn't bring myself to care. Whyborne settled against me, equally limp.

We didn't speak for a while. My mind drifted from the sated present to when we'd taken Reggie home. How happy his family had been. How his brother cried with joy to have him back.

This was my home. Here with Saul and my Ival. I'd been so afraid to try to find my brothers . . . but even if they rejected me, I'd still have this. Still have the man in my arms. Nothing would change that.

"I love you, Ival," I murmured into his hair.

He snuggled more tightly back against me. "I love you, too."

"I think . . . I think I'll send the letter tomorrow."

He tensed against me for a moment. Then he relaxed and took my hand in his, twining our fingers together. "Of course. I'll do whatever I can to help."

I kissed him gratefully and held him until the bathwater grew cold.



About Jordan L. Hawk

Jordan L. Hawk grew up in North Carolina and forgot to ever leave. Childhood tales of mountain ghosts and mysterious creatures gave her a life-long love of things that go bump in the night. When she isn't writing, she brews her own beer and tries to keep her cats from destroying the house. Her

best-selling Whyborne & Griffin series (beginning with *Widdershins*) can be found in print, ebook, and audiobook at online retailers.

Contact

Website: jordanlhawk.com

Twitter: twitter.com/jordanlhawk



DELIVERANCE

by

Aleksandr Voinov

For Julie

The hushed tones of the evening prayer stopped when the chapel doors were flung open. William, who always struggled to settle his mind and emotions just after training, craned his neck.

A black-clad sergeant brother rushed along the aisle towards Master Arnauld, who awaited him with calm and dignity. William found himself straining to listen to their whispered exchange; already, his blood was coursing faster, his body straining to stand and fight instead of kneel.

Master Arnauld thanked the sergeant with a nod, then swept his gaze over the gathered brothers. "To arms, with God's will." The room erupted into fast, efficient movement.

The knights who had just come in from arms training gathered in the yard; others rushed to squires waiting with armour, horses and weapons. William spotted his squire Hamo waiting for him near the gates, the dappled grey destrier pawing the parched ground as if the beast were imploring them to make more haste.

William strode towards them. "What is this about?"

"Saracen incursion. They attacked a group of Christians on the road, not far from here." Hamo placed William's white cappa round his shoulders. "One boy escaped to beg for help."

"He lived?" William mounted the warhorse, which shifted eagerly underneath him.

Hamo shrugged. "He had a couple arrows sticking out of him. Damned heathens must have thought him dead."

Saracen incursions were, sadly, a frequent occurrence ever since the dog Saladin had found his courage and started to attack the Christian heartlands.

His destrier tossed its head, and William reached down to pat the stallion's neck.

Finally, all the knights were mounted; further back, the sergeant brothers, more numerous, had gathered around their commander too. William put on his helmet, then gripped his lance, his sword and mace girded at his side. The master signalled and the knights rode out into the searing sun, falling into formation out on the road. Once through the gate, their horses broke into a canter, and William's heart widened, opened.

Bernard of Clairvaux had described the Templars as lions in war and lambs in the convent. But as much as William had tried, he couldn't for the life of him imagine what a lamb would feel like. While their sacred rule

forbade falconry and all other hunting, they were allowed to hunt lions; William had once stood over a slain lion, then knelt and touched one of those fearsome paws, gazed into the golden eyes. Even in death, his red blood buzzing with flies, the lion had looked nothing like a lamb.

Just then, William thought he heard screams, even through the helmet; shrill sounds of fear and agony carried far in this land. He couldn't be sure over the noise of hooves and his armour, but then the master signalled the charge.

The knights moved closer together, thighs almost touching as the formation tightened closed, horses reaching and straining, foam splattering the cloth coverings of white and black and red. White for their purity. Black for the terror in the hearts of the heathens. And the red, red cross of martyrdom.

They came over the hill, and the sight below made William's breath catch in his throat. He'd worried they'd be too late—and for some of the pilgrims, they were. Several lay dead already; others cowered, screaming for help. Amid them stood one man who had seized a Saracen sword and shield and fought against four heathens, an upturned cart to his back.

Other Saracens were plundering, women and children already bound under guard to be carried off into slavery. The attackers might be mere bandits or an advance unit of Saladin's army. Maybe foragers who'd seen fit to harass Christians wherever they encountered them.

A warning cry rang out—a number of Saracens hurried to their horses; others turned, swords in hands, eyes betraying surprise and hatred, but above all, fear.

William gritted his teeth. Along with the other knights, he couched his lance in his elbow and aligned the triangular shield. Together, they drove into the Saracens like a thunderbolt, the sheer force grinding the Saracens into the dust. William's lance broke in the chest of an enemy, and his heavy destrier toppled the Saracen's horse. He let the ashwood shaft drop away, then pulled his sword from its scabbard and hacked at the enemies, who turned and ran, cowards that they were.

Two brethren pursued one infidel who made a desperate bid for escape, but a sergeant had his crossbow cocked and shot the bastard square between the shoulders. The man lost his balance on his galloping horse, tilted first to the left, then the right, and eventually fell backwards, foot caught in his stirrup. His horse dragged him for several hundred yards across stones and dried bush before he finally came loose and lay motionless.

William left the dying foes to the sergeants and squires, who finished the wounded off before they searched them. Saracens kept their valuables on their bodies, which provided some immediate satisfaction to those who

killed them. It was a ghastly thing, plundering a still-warm body, but the Saracens' outlandish customs had caused the Christians to adopt many a ghastly behaviour.

William pulled his helmet off and turned his horse to face the fighting pilgrim, who only now lowered his sword and shield. His wide-brimmed hat half-observed a fierce face, sharp features under the blond, unkempt beard. Standing tall and proud, he was clearly no stranger to knightly skills, having felled the three Saracens whose bodies lay at his feet.

Master Arnould rode in a circle, then removed his helmet and spoke to the survivors. "We will escort you to our preceptory, where, with God's grace, you will be safe."

The pilgrims had no horses but the draft animals on the carts. It would be fastest to take them to the fortress on the Templars' horses. William nodded toward the fighting pilgrim and motioned him to come closer, then bent down to offer the man a hand. "They may return with more men. Saladin's army is close."

The pilgrim gripped his wrist and mounted the horse. His arms closed around William's waist, and his solid body pressed closer than any man had been for a long time. William usually liked to keep his distance from others, but even the master took a wounded man on his destrier. The old symbol of the order, two knights on one horse. Sometimes, that was simply a necessity.

"Who are you?" demanded the pilgrim.

William bristled at the gruff tone, but after standing alone against Saracens and being barely rescued alive from slavery or worse, the pilgrim could be forgiven his lack of manners. "Brother William Raven. And you?"

There was a long pause. "William Raven? Of Kent?"

"Yes." William turned his horse and followed the other brethren back to the fortress, too aware of the other man behind him, the touch and press of his body as inevitable as unwelcome. It unnerved him, too, that the pilgrim knew him, but then, he had been famous in his time, even if that life now lay far behind him. "Who are you?"

The pilgrim didn't grace him with an answer, not even when they reached the fortress. There, servants were helping the pilgrims off the horses and leading them away to the guest quarters, where they would receive care for their wounds, water, and food.

Relieved when the man dismounted, William expected him to leave with his companions, but the pilgrim turned and met his gaze in a clear challenge. Something about the defiant look, the flaring nostrils . . . William racked his mind for a memory. The longer they held each other's gaze, the more urgent the question became. If not for the hat, he might be able to recognise him.

But this way, all he had was a vague sense that he knew the man, or at least had encountered him before. William had crossed blades all over Europe with friend and foe, ever hungry for the next challenge, unable to settle down for fear of being known for what he was.

“You do not remember,” the pilgrim said, sneering. He pulled off the hat to bare blond, sweat-matted hair. “I shall help you, then. Remember Metz.”

Guy de Metz. William felt cold in the scorching midday sun. The shadeless, murderous heat allowed no escape, and he stood, transfixed.

Guy. Of all people. Him, here. The scion of an eminent family in the city of Metz, with lands and riches far beyond anything William had ever achieved, even at the height of his fame and fortune. Guy. His shame, his sin, his guilt. Bearded, sunburned, in his simple pilgrim’s clothes, it was hard to recognise the fashionable young nobleman he had been, what, only six years ago?

Guy followed the other pilgrims, but his face betrayed anger. The man held the key to destroy him.

The thought sobered William as if a loaded crossbow were pointed at his heart. He had to force himself to turn away, but it was hard to breathe the hot air. Terror had set into his soul, and fear and longing, because he *remembered* Guy now. Remembered his own flight from what had begun during that saint’s festival in Metz, when the nobles jousted and celebrated. He’d run as far as he could, seeking solace and redemption, until, finally, the Templars had welcomed him. They knew not his sin, but they told him that all his past misdeeds would be forgiven if he fought the heathens rather than his Christian brothers. That he would go to Heaven if he fell in service of the Lord. This had been the most generous offer for which he could have hoped. Unable to escape his shame, he’d finally found peace of a kind in subservience to God.

In his quarters, he cleaned the dust away and shed the armour, but hardly managed to grasp one clear thought for the memory of Guy. When he lay on his bed that night after prayers in the chapel, his soul had not received comfort from the holy words. He was unworthy. He still remembered a strong neck bent underneath his, and Guy’s breath hitching as William drove into him, again and again, taking his fill of the young noble’s strong body in unspeakable, sinful ways. The memory made him hard, made him ache for the other man. If he’d hoped to escape his sinful attraction, this now completed his shame.

According to the order’s rule, he shared the chamber with another knight, a German by the name of Conrad, and he was guiltily thankful that night for Conrad’s deep sleep. Nothing short of an earthquake woke the

German. Certainly not the small sounds William made as he touched himself, eyes tightly shut, willing his hand to be Guy's hand, Guy's lips, even.

An enthusiastic student of sin, Guy knew no shame. He'd demanded William give up control of his body, and his soul with it; compared to that, this was a pale shadow of a memory.

William pressed his teeth together and made himself breathe levelly as his own calloused hand forced his desire. His body responded too readily to both memory and touch. Closer. Like that rushed, near-painful encounter in the narrow, dark alley of Metz. Or the stolen, illicit pleasure in a bath house, where Guy had laughed at the prostitute servants and sent them away with a mocking, "Nothing I can't handle." Guy's wet, glistening body, bruised where he'd been hit, the most beautiful thing in the world to William when they kissed, wrestled and fucked vigorously enough to nearly topple the tub and cover the floor in soapy water.

Grunting, Conrad turned on his bed. William froze, heart beating painfully in his throat. *Don't wake.* He peered at Conrad, who faced him now, face slack in sleep, lips open. Oh, the risk. All Conrad had to do was open his eyes, and he'd know exactly what William was doing. But William was too close to stop.

As silently as he could manage, William spat in his hand and slid it back under the light cover. His palm closed around the tip, squeezing the most sensitive part until his mind clouded and all he could think was *Guy*. A few more powerful movements with his tight fist brought him to completion with a choked, miserable sound. The madness, the passion that had possessed him with Guy had sunk its hooks back into his flesh. He lay there, despairing, as the sweat on his skin cooled in the night that was as unforgivingly cold as the day was hot.



He'd hoped Guy would be gone the next morning, but Master Arnauld dashed those hopes when he told the assembled knights that Guy de Metz, who had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem with his entourage, would join their fight against the heathens.

William suspected he was the only Templar who felt those words like a blow. Many knights on pilgrimage joined a fighting order for a short time. The Church encouraged it; the defenders of the Holy Land were always desperately short of men. The fighting orders were already stretched thin to protect what they held, and they couldn't dream of expanding that protection. But why now, why here, and why not the Hospitallers? Or,

William thought with the blackest of misgivings, the leprosy-riddled Lazarites?

After the assembly, Guy approached him. William turned away. Guy touched his shoulder, which made William face him again and grip the bastard by the front of his shirt.

"You *dare* touch me," he hissed into Guy's face. Anger surged inside his chest, as if the ignominy of the night had been Guy's doing. He raised his free hand and balled it into a fist.

The peace he'd found in the order seemed precarious all of the sudden, and he hungered to retain it. Until now, it had been his only peace in this constant war with the Saracens.

Guy's hands closed around William's fist, but his stare never wavered. Those light blue eyes showed no fear, only anger, but behind the hostility—he saw an unspoken question.

"William!" Master Arnauld shouted. "Unhand him *at once!*"

William bared his teeth in a feral sneer, still staring at Guy. Disobeying a direct order was unthinkable, and William knew well the punishment for fighting against fellow Christians. He had seen men stripped of their white cappa or flogged to the blood for infractions.

"Don't you touch me," he repeated, and let Guy go.



During the next two days, William felt like a lion in a trap. Wherever he turned, whatever he did, he caught glimpses of Guy's blond hair. He could hardly eat. He even stumbled over his words in prayer during the day. At night, the other man followed him into sleep. Guy's very presence in the same fortress made William's body betray him, reminding him of a lust he'd hoped he'd left behind. While Conrad remained oblivious, William was forced to satisfy the hollow ache in his body. The craving, forgotten for so many years, now returned like an enemy army—with reinforcements and even more devilish tricks.

On the third day, it was William's turn to train with Guy. The marshal gave out the pairings, treating Guy just like any Templar. The pilgrim had to be ready to stand with them in battle when they rode out.

William could not decide whether he was horrified at having to meet Guy, even if it was with a sword in his hand, or delighted at the opportunity to take out his anger on the man.

After a restless prayer, William strode onto to the field outside the fortress. Servants and squires stood ready with lances and horses, and William took off his cappa to avoid soiling or tearing it. In the manner of

monks, he kissed the red cross before he folded the garment and handed it to Hamo.

His chain mail glinting in the sun, William mounted his destrier and rode to the far end of the field, where a servant handed him his jousting lance and shield. Opposite, Guy had just put on his helmet and climbed into the saddle, where he gripped the reins and shield.

William drove his spurs into the stallion's flanks. The beast flew into a gallop, the massive, powerful body stretching under him as he lowered the lance and couched it, aiming at Guy's shield. He remembered the jousts, the ladies in their colourful clothes, and the roar of the crowd. He'd been among the best professional jousts in Europe. Germans, English, Italians, and scores of French—no matter who had dared to meet him on the field, they all had tumbled into the dirt. Here, his deeds were for God alone and flushed no fair cheek.

The other Templars watched critically; nobody cheered or laughed, eyes didn't widen in shock at the clash. With a resounding crack, William's lance broke on Guy's shield. At the exact same moment, Guy's lance broke on his. The force of the impact numbed William's shoulder and he bit down on a curse. Guy was good—

much better than he had been six years ago. The younger Guy would already have been unhorsed.

And now Guy even raised his hand in a salute. *Mocking* him. William's pride flared, and he tore a fresh lance from a servant's hand. Without pause, he charged again at Guy, who had barely enough time to take a fresh lance himself and spur on his own horse.

The second pair of lances broke, and again, they both remained seated. William narrowed his eyes; his laboured breathing echoed in the helmet.

Damn that bastard, damn him to Hell.

He, William Raven, who had fought as champion of earls and counts, very nearly undefeated on the jousting ground and certainly on the battlefield, was the best there was. If he'd had one political bone in his body, his military prowess alone would make him a master of the order eventually.

Their combat drew more watchers. Servants, squires and knights alike came closer, no doubt to watch William Raven taught a lesson in humility.

Anger rose hot in his chest until he felt his heart would burst. They broke lance upon lance, always with the same result; both remained on their horses. The joust became a blur of dust and sweat and foaming horses, until Master Arnould signalled for them to dismount and continue with swords.

William didn't want to fight like this; he wanted to crush Guy's limbs with the mace, wrestle him to the ground and strangle him. But he obeyed the master's order.

Guy matched him blow for blow, giving him no quarter, seemingly impervious to the heat and dust that made sweat run down William's face. Their shields clashed and William met Guy's eyes through the visor. *When did I learn to hate you?* The thought made him draw back in shock, giving Guy the opening he needed. Guy battered him to the ground with his shield, sword tip seeking the gap between helmet and chain mail coif. William reached for the sword he'd let go, set his feet on the ground to push himself up when Guy's sword lowered, pressing against the chain mail just over his throat. And in Guy's eyes was nothing but determination.

He'll kill me. He's grown into a man who can and will kill me. And he has good reason to.

William could only stare. He couldn't even find the words for prayer.

His sword tip steady, Guy dropped the shield and clumsily pulled the helmet from his head. He dropped it into the dust, then undid the chainmail flap that covered the lower part of his face. His eyes now flamed with an emotion William could only assume mirrored the rage he felt.

"Have you truly reformed, William?" Guy asked. "Have you?"

"I'm a soldier of Christ." Hopefully, nobody understood what this challenge was really about. He couldn't bear to be known for what he was. Not here, where he'd been welcomed with open arms and given one chance at redemption.

"Are you, now?" Guy sheathed his sword and composed his features. He offered William a hand to pull him up. William hesitated. He had to hide his secret, and Master Arnould was watching. Enduring hostility would not be tolerated.

He stood, and Guy held his hand and pulled him close, their armoured chests touching.

"Meet me in the barn after midnight," Guy whispered, then shook his hand and let him go, seemingly unconcerned.

The brethren gave William wide berth for the rest of the day, but he knew that behind his back they jeered that William Raven, the undefeated, had eaten dust at the hands of a mere pilgrim.

Speculation was rife about the stranger's past. Guy did not talk about it, but instead professed humility.

William fulfilled his duties and did not recall them afterward. He could not concentrate on the prayers, and was glad for the time simply passing. He did not want to meet him, but knowing Guy, he would never leave if William did not follow the command. Guy would play this game until he received what he wished for.

Seeing those memories so vividly in front of his eyes whenever William allowed his mind to drift was a slow, insistent torture. And it

seemed like his mind could do *nothing* but return to it. He could not escape.

With a sense of defeat, William stole away in the moonlight to the barn right next to the stables. A dark mantle covered his white cappa, hiding it from the eyes of the guards. He had never felt so unworthy of the garment. Inside the barn, Guy was already waiting for him. He motioned William silently toward the back, where they were protected from anyone casting a searching glance inside.

The smell of grain and hay reminded William of summer and autumn, of more peaceful times, of endeavours other than war. A few moonbeams made their way through the windows higher up, casting light and shadows over Guy's handsome face and making his blue eyes glow.

"William," Guy said, tasting his name as if he were weighing his soul. "You, of all places, here."

"And you, as a pilgrim," William retorted.

"I have committed a grave sin. The bishop told me to seek penance in Jerusalem." Guy stared at him, as if to fix him to the spot with an unspoken challenge. "My sin is like yours."

William's chest tightened; he knew Guy's sin too well. They had committed it together. "Which one? Spilling Christian blood? Plunder?"

Guy shook his head, dismissing the weak defence, and stepped closer. The monk's habit did not protect William nearly as well as the armour had. His shoulders touched the wall before he realised he had stepped back. Guy's palm came up to cup his face. The fingers of his other hand dug into William's neck muscles. This touch was unbearable, and William pulled away. He'd much rather have ridden alone straight into the heart of the enemy, endured the relentless heat of the desert or a flogging for a crime than be touched by Guy. But his body remembered Guy and his heart beat faster at the touch.

"If you hate me so, why are you here?" Guy asked.

"To tell you to leave." *Please, leave, before my resolve cracks again.* "I have found peace here."

Guy's face fell. "Then why are you shaking? William Raven is afraid of nothing."

William wanted to push him away and free himself. Guy reminded him of his own pride, of the free, restless, and often lawless life he'd led, of his own recklessness. He'd always fought as though he would—*could*—never die. As though God could never punish him for the deed.

"I'm not that man anymore," William whispered.

"Are you not? You bear his form, speak with his voice, you *feel* the same." Guy pressed into him, bringing their bodies flush, with no space left for even a dagger blade between them.

William remembered how they'd touched and kissed and fucked for days, never leaving the bed. Wild times . . . the saint's festival, the city of Metz full of nobility and fighters and painted whores. During those times William had thought, had *hoped* there could be rest for him. He'd lain in Guy's arms and held the man at his shoulder, believing that maybe, maybe, there was a life without shame for them.

"How can you have peace," Guy demanded, "when I came here to pray for deliverance, having found it nowhere else? I came to the Holy Land, begging forgiveness for my sin of loving you. Feeling that if any place in the world could work that miracle, it must be Jerusalem."

"And you found me," William said.

Guy dismissed that with an irritated shake of his head. "I am no longer looking for forgiveness. This was a fool's errand. If loving you is a sin, I'll gladly burn in Hell."

Is, not was. William almost choked on his breath.

After the death of his master and first lover, Sir Robert de Cantilou, he hadn't dared to approach another man. He'd had no doubt that he'd never find Sir Robert's equal, would never again share his heart, body and soul with another warrior. And the risk was too great. In the eyes of the Church, the sin was too monstrous, and made more monstrous if he defiled the body of a man who himself had honour and power. Transgressions with a servant might be more easily forgiven, or their silence bought with a silver coin.

But, a small voice in his head taunted, only another warrior had the strength to love him.

A pain as intense as receiving a wound in combat pierced him. "Why don't you just leave?"

Guy's lips were so close that William felt the man's breath gentle on his face. "I've heard them say that love is like a falcon, but I'd never felt the falcon's claws pierce my heart until you kissed me. Tell me you didn't mean it. Tell me you don't love me now."

"I'm a monk, Guy. I . . ."

How could he deny that damned desire? Guy was different—older and bearded and a much better fighter now. But he was still the same man too, fearless and challenging. He was rebellious, defiant, and proud, but even if his pride was sinful, William could not think of Guy as evil. Not even now.

Guy didn't listen, or he didn't care. He kissed William's face, his throat, pressed into him with all the abandon of a love denied for too long.

For six forlorn years, William had thought he'd never see Guy again. He'd wanted to forget him. He'd joined the order to do penance for his sins, for the one fault he'd never been able to fix, and to escape the politics, the intrigue, the rumours and whispers, and a passion he'd never been able to cut

from his heart. Now, in the land of promise, on the same earth on which the Son of God had walked, and in the teeth of the enemy, he faced the madness again, and his lover's feverish light blue eyes.

"I have given myself . . . to God." William groaned when Guy's hands opened his belt. Guy didn't listen, didn't stop even for a moment as he pulled the cappa off him, stripping him to the light linen shirt, leggings and breeches.

"You had no right to," Guy whispered harshly, hands now on William's red woollen belt—the symbol of chastity. "You had no right to give him what you gave me. I never released you."

William took Guy's hands, stilling them in a last, desperate attempt to not succumb to this temptation. "I was free to go."

"You *weren't*." Guy pressed William's hands in his. "The things you swore . . . that you loved me, that you would stay with me. And then you stole away like a thief? All I heard was that you'd given away everything you owned and joined an order, denying me."

"I did not."

"Oh, I know your Templar rites. Your master told me about them. They ask whether any man has any claim over you. You *cannot* join the order if such a claim exists. You may not be married, you may not be sought for murder, or owe another debt . . . but what about *my* claim over you?" Guy bared his teeth. "Does this mean less than a debt unpaid?"

Yes. It had to. One was a promise made while addled with passion, the other a higher calling, a sacrifice, martyrdom. Even Sir Robert had spoken of joining the Templars—but yet, he never did, and then his life had been cut short by treachery. "You cannot compare—"

"Were you a liar then? Who did you lie to, William, because both cannot be true at the same time."

Sir Robert had taught him everything he knew about being a knight. How to be true to his word, a trustworthy friend to his friends, how to be loyal, and most importantly, about how he might fail to live up to the ideals, but also how constant striving for them was what set a knight apart.

True to his friends. True to his word.

Guy was right. During the rite of acceptance, William had denied any claim over him existed. He'd told himself that those were sins he was leaving behind, but while he had not broken the *letter* of the rule, he'd certainly broken its spirit. He had joined under false pretences. "I spoke the truth then. You are dear to me."

"Finally." Guy kissed him, one hand against his throat as if to hold him under control. Those fierce kisses dazed him and ignited the old fire he'd thought doused. Instead, the embers had been hidden safe in the ash, and

now, rekindled, the heat returned. A dark red core like a pain in his chest flared, and he gave up, accepted this defeat just like the one on the testing ground.

He couldn't help the groan when Guy's hand slid downwards along his body, and a tremble passed through him he couldn't suppress. Nobody had touched him like this in six years, and it seemed to him as if his body had forgotten what it was like to be touched with passion and need rather than an accidental brush or the mad straining of combat or training. He'd taken the vow of chastity and done his best to keep it. If such sins existed among the brothers, he didn't know of it, didn't seek it out, refused to be seducer or seduced. But when Guy touched his groin, there was clear proof that his body had never truly forgotten a lover's touch. That his blood was just as sinful as it had ever been.

And yet, he remembered the utter peace he'd felt in Guy's arms, and Robert's before him.

A peace he craved worse than the contact from that demanding hand. "Guy, we—"

"Be still, my falcon." Guy took William's neck in his strong grip and pulled him close while his free hand stoked the maddening fire.

William gasped with want and need. He despised himself for having left Guy then, and for breaking his vows now. He pushed his hands under Guy's shirt, feeling the hot skin, the ripple of muscles as Guy shifted. He couldn't turn back now.

Six years. Why had he waited so long?

His hands were unsteady when he opened Guy's belt. The sound of the buckle hitting the ground seemed loud enough to alarm the guards. He knew he shouldn't be doing this, but he didn't want to stop.

He pulled off Guy's shirt and dropped it to the barn floor before kissing the broad shoulder, the line of the man's collarbone. His teeth found the strong muscle between shoulder and neck, and on his chest William thought he felt a scar that hadn't been there six years ago.

Guy hissed at the bite, but laughed quietly. "What's that? Revenge for besting you?"

"I've bested you a hundred times." William kissed Guy's throat and freed him from the breeches, touching him just to tease him, making the other man growl softly in his throat.

"Not this time." Guy pushed him back against some sacks of grain.

William resisted, took hold of Guy's neck and forced him into a wrestling hold.

Fighting Guy was almost as good as fucking him, and William gave a short laugh. Guy placed an arm around his hips and tried to unbalance him.

William leaned against him, then Guy abruptly changed the movement, pulling now instead of pushing, and they stumbled against the grain sacks. William managed to use the momentum to get on top, holding Guy down with his weight, grinding against his groin.

Guy stared at him in a clear challenge, the expression on his moonlit features enough to make William's blood surge. He bent his neck, kissing that chest, the fine blond hair there, feeling Guy's strong fingers pull his head closer, press his face against his skin.

He knew what Guy really wanted, could read him so well, and yet it was always a struggle. Now, though, Guy was better matched to his own strength. William removed Guy's breeches, then pulled down his own, baring them both completely. He pressed his cock against Guy's groin, felt the other's heat and desire, his chest expanding with choked breaths, his muscles coiled as with the beginning of a fight.

Guy wouldn't give up, and that aroused William even more. Guy hadn't come here to *get* fucked.

Guy bucked underneath him, but William resisted, ground against Guy's movements, and the man visibly struggled to just give in. William knew him well enough to see Guy's impatience was beginning to get the better of him. He kissed Guy deeply, pushing his tongue between lips that resisted at first but then kissed him back with all the desperation that mirrored William's own.

The only warning William received was Guy pulling away, then Guy hooked his leg around his thigh and forced him to roll over. The uneven surface of the sacks made them move farther than Guy had intended. William landed on his back with a harsh sound, but he laughed when Guy grinned at him.

"Got you," Guy whispered. "Turn around."

William disentangled himself just enough to turn, never fully breaking skin contact, brushing against Guy's naked body. He laughed at the thought of doing it here, in a dusty barn, when they had lain on silken beds and forest clearings in bloom. He pulled his knees under him, felt Guy shift on top, trusting him with one thing: there would be no quarter given or received. Their love had rarely been tender.

True to this, Guy spat, then groaned and pushed against him. William braced himself, head hanging low, weight on his elbows and knees. Guy's arm slid around William as the man used his raw strength to push into him.

William almost shouted out against the pain, but it came mixed with a pleasure that he had no name for. Being taken, being *claimed*, wiped out all thoughts of guilt. The rough invasion made him bite down on curses and pleas, but for what, he wouldn't have known. Not mercy, not redemption,

not being spared this. He wanted Guy, even welcomed the pain. It made this stolen encounter more real, and maybe the pain was part of the punishment for the sin.

William gave a choked sound when he felt Guy's body flush against his.

"So long . . ." Guy whispered. "It's been . . . the same for you."

William gritted his teeth.

Guy pulled back and added more spit before pushing against him with even more force as though trying to break the resistance of his body. With the next thrust, he could feel himself yield. The pain turned into a low burn and the pleasure increased so that William had to suppress his moans.

His dizzy mind concentrated on where they touched, on Guy's sweaty hands running over his body, then taking his hips to steady him for more forceful thrusts. Guy had no need to pin him like this. William pushed back, face twisted in a grimace, teeth bared in an animal snarl as his lover fucked him—the one man alive who *dared* claim him.

"Demanding . . ." Guy laughed, meeting every movement with a thrust of the hips.

Their strengths pitted against each other, demand and control mutual, wanting and craving shared.

Guy's thrusts became more erratic. He sped up until everything melted and the burn was blanked out and turned into need. William couldn't find the balance to touch himself, but he was getting close. He was about to beg Guy to release him when he felt Guy come inside him with several more desperate thrusts.

Before William could ask to be touched, Guy pulled away and pushed him down, turned him around roughly and immediately closed his lips around his cock, sucking with so much eagerness and hunger that it pushed William over the edge.

William pulled Guy down onto his cock, making him choke. The small revenge for what Guy had done didn't last long. Guy didn't fight it. They'd always been rough.

William thrust up into Guy's throat and release came almost immediately, tensing every muscle in his body and shaking him to the core.

Guy struggled free, coughing, but then he grinned and sat back against the grain sacks, wiping his face with one hand. The familiar gesture brought back memories of their fights at tournaments; they'd worked together as a team and made a fortune taking other knights captive until they paid ransom. In ten months, they had taken well over one hundred and twenty knights, and spent a lot of the money on food, drink, horses, and gifts. They'd been fierce lovers, undefeatable together, the presence of the other bolstering both

courage and strength. It had been the best time of their lives.

William caught his breath, lying flat on the ground, wishing nothing more than to pull Guy close and rest with him. To find that solace in his touch after release, to feel his every breath, secure in his strength and devotion.

Yet the sin had eventually caught up with him. The rumours, the whispers about their ‘unnatural’ bond, the sin of Sodom, had unnerved him, forced him away. He couldn’t face the sneers, the snide remarks—losing Robert just a few months prior had weakened him, had left him rudderless and adrift, too weak to withstand his enemies, and he hadn’t wanted to drag Guy into all this along with him. They were better off alone, he’d thought. Time heals everything, he’d thought.

I was wrong.

They rested wordlessly for a long time, not touching, their hearts beating on their own, their breath mingling not with each other’s, but with the cold night air. William studied Guy’s features, the colour of his hair in the moonlight.

Guy said he had a claim over him, and even if William would normally be loath to admit it, it was doubtlessly true. He had made promises, given those oaths not just in the heat of passion, but also in the tender moments that followed. He had pledged himself to this man, just like he’d pledged himself to Sir Robert while he’d lived. If he’d learned one thing, then that love could still die. He’d left Sir Robert and heard of his death while abroad. For months, he’d had to contend with the guilt and the question whether Sir Robert’s enemies would have got the better of him if he, William, had been there to protect him.

William groaned. Could he stand to lose Guy in the same way? Could he let him go and turn his back on him, now that Guy had found him from an ocean away? But it was no use. He had sworn an oath, dedicated the rest of his life and the strength of his arms to protect pilgrims and the Holy Land.

“Conrad will miss me.”

“Conrad?” Guy looked up.

“I share a room with another knight. As is custom, to guard each other’s purity.” William grinned without humour. This had been madness, a lapse in judgment. He couldn’t regret it, but every moment he stayed, his resolve weakened. He got up and gathered his clothes, putting them back on.

Guy, however, didn’t move. “Stay.”

“I have to obey the rules.” William fastened his clothes again. “Don’t damn us both. You have to go back. The guards will wonder what you are doing outside the guest quarters.” And Master Arnould wasn’t lenient about sin. If they were discovered—if anybody even guessed what bond they

shared, they would be severely punished. Arnauld might let Guy go after a stern warning, but William was in his power.

“Is that it, then?”

“You have to finish your pilgrimage, and I have given my vows.” William put on the dark mantle and walked toward the door. “God bless you, Guy.”

“Tell me you don’t love me, and I’ll leave you in peace,” Guy snapped.

William’s palm, flat against the door, formed a fist. He couldn’t. He *did* love Guy. Even if the bastard made him grind his teeth. “I do.”

You know I do.

But it was impossible. He was a Templar. With his vows, William had given up the right to go where he pleased. Templars were sent where they were needed. A man like him belonged in the heart of battle. It was his life’s purpose; he was made to do battle against the heathen, to win his own worth through service that would count against his sins when he died. This was a matter of his soul, his faith, and he would not leave the one place in the world where he had found something like redemption. Above all, he couldn’t run away *again*.

Yet, Guy’s claim was valid, too. He’d given promises and never kept them. It was a grave sin, perjury; any oath he had sworn during the initiation meant nothing. The promises to his lover made everything a lie. Six years with the Templars, countless times he’d offered up his life and body in battle, yet his sins condemned him as surely as breaking these oaths.

Either way, he was damned. He bent his neck, unable to reach a decision.

Guy stepped up close to him and placed both hands on his shoulders.

“You love me and yet you have to go?”

“Forgive me, Guy.”

“Do you remember the first tournament? When we crossed swords, much as we did today?” Guy’s voice was thick with emotion. “Do you remember how you bested me and how I came to ransom my weapons from you? Instead of silver, you claimed a kiss from me.” Guy’s lips were so close that William felt his breath on his neck.

William couldn’t answer. It might have been madness, but it had turned into love. A well-known professional jousting knight and the scion of an important family. He shouldn’t have demanded that first kiss, but he couldn’t regret it now. Maybe it would be easier if he could have.

There was really only one solution to the problem. “Release me from my oath, Guy. If I’m no longer bound by my word . . .” *I can remain here, and deny you. Maybe I’ll save us both that way.*

“I prayed so hard for deliverance.” Guy kissed his neck and embraced

him. “I cannot release you. And I won’t. Those weren’t just words, William. I believed in them. I cannot shake that faith.”

Those ties held, the oath was still valid, and Guy, of course, gave him no quarter, didn’t allow him the coward’s way out. Their love had always been a battle, an endless string of competition—who was the better fighter, the better drinker, the better gambler, the better rider. For his soul’s sake, for the memory of his master, he had to honour his oaths, and they seemed careless to him now, even though, no doubt, he’d meant them when he’d spoken them.

But there were the other memories, too; he remembered them both drunk with victory, drunk on each other’s strength. How after mourning Robert for so long, Guy had made his heart beat again, had ended the darkness in William’s soul and filled it with again with passion and joy. He remembered how young and radiant Guy’s face had been, how he’d lain at his side, spilling spiced wine down his front. William had licked it off him only too gladly, combining the spices and the dark red wine with the salt from his skin.

He wanted to taste Guy’s skin again, wanted to hear him laugh. He wanted to feel him struggle, and guard his side in battle.

He loved him. Always would. And he didn’t want to be released.



Author Note

This is a new edition of a story with the same title published by a small (now defunct) press in 2009. I’ve cleaned up the style, added about a thousand words and smoothed the story overall with the help of my editor Nerine Dorman (thank you!). *Deliverance* was the first appearance of William Raven, whose background Kate Cotoner and I explored in the novella *The Lion of Kent*. I’m currently (late 2014) researching the overall period for a follow-up story with the tentative title *Lions of Damascus*.

About Aleksandr Voinov

EPIC Award winner and Lambda Award finalist Aleksandr Voinov is an emigrant German author living near London, where he runs a global financial magazine. His genres range from science fiction and fantasy to thriller, historical, contemporary, thriller, and erotica. His books were/are published by Heyne/Random House Germany, Samhain Publishing, Riptide Publishing and others.

Contact

Website: aleksandrvoinov.com

Blog: aleksandrvoinov.blogspot.com

Twitter: twitter.com/aleksandrvoinov